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The Rio Kid Western

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

Vol. XXV, No. 2 JANUARY, 1953

A COMPLETE RIO KID NOVEL

PIRATES OF PANAMINT.....Walker A. Tompkins 10

It would take an army, it seemed, to get the silver of Panamint City safely through Death Valley. But Bob Pryor, the Rio Kid, was used to facing long odds

AN ACTION NOVELET

MONTANA SHOWDOWN.....Tom Roan 74

Phil was the last of the fighting Channings, and he had but two choices — run or fight his girl's father

SHORT STORIES

THE SAGA OF COWPEN CENTER.....Ben Frank 59

Once Charley Carter's dander was up — just look out!

THE SHERIFF'S FRIEND.....W. Lamar Fly 69

Berryman needed someone to side him against this mob

THE BULLET.....Robert Sidney Bowen 100

The doctor was certain Malone would try to kill him

TRACES CUT.....Giles A. Lutz 106

Jim Watkins couldn't be fooled about cattle or horses

FEATURES

THE BUNKHOUSE (A Department).....Leslie Ernenwein 6

PANAMINT CITY.....Background of the Novel 9

EPITAPH (Verse).....Pecos Pete 79

Also see portraits and biographies of these real-life pioneers in "Pirates of Panamint" — Elias J. "Lucky" Baldwin, Page 33; John Percival Jones, Page 39, and William Morris Stewart, Page 49

JIM HENDRYX, JR., *Editor*

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THE Bunkhouse

Where nothing but yarns are swapped

Conducted by LESLIE ERNENWEIN

THEY put on quite a show at the 1952 Calgary Stampede. Like always they had the best ropers, bronc stompers and bull riders in the West. But this year they had something extra special—they had Ed Echols, the famous old cowpoke who won top money at the first Calgary Stampede in 1912.

And they did him proud.

"I rode in their parade," Ed told me, a twinkle in his blue eyes. "There was a loud-mouthed feller up front with a megaphone and he kept hollerin': 'Here's Ed Echols, the champeen roper of the first Stampede.' Them folks sure treated me good."

There probably wasn't a man, woman or boy in that section of Alberta who didn't get told about Ed Echols, one way or another. How he had set a world's record for roping in 1912, and about him being a personal friend of such Western greats as Will Rogers, Charlie Russell and Tom Mix.

They heard about his long careers as a badgetoter and what an all-around top hand he was. But one important thing about Ed wasn't mentioned—his liking for snug fitted bench-made boots.

Of the Old Breed

Like a lot of Texans, Ed is a big six-footer with faded blue eyes, a shy sort of smile and a quiet manner. He looks like what he is: a member of the old cowpoke breed that dabbed their loops on the Longhorns. Born at Stockdale, Texas, in 1879, Ed rode the range when it was rough.

He was a slow-growin' boy, and weighed only 100 pounds when he was seventeen; he wanted to be a jockey but his mother, a strict Baptist, talked him out of it. Instead he learned all there was to know about roping.

"We didn't have much school learnin' in them days," Ed admits. "But what little we got we learned real good."

He came to Arizona with his brother, riding in an old Studebaker chuckwagon hauled by four horses, with an extra horse tied to the tailgate. He punched cows for several outfits, including the Three C's, the Double Rod and the C Bar.

"We didn't market yearlin' steers in them days," he recalled. "Beef steers were mostly big three and four year-olds and they could sure jolt your pony when you tied on to one."

New Stomping Grounds

In 1907 Ed, with another young cowboy, signed on with Miller's 101 Wild West Show, each earning wages of $15 per week and board. The other cowpoke was Tom Mix, who later became the outstanding star of Western movies. Mix was killed in an automobile accident in 1947 a few minutes after visiting Ed Echols in Tucson . . .

Ed was back punching cows when he got the idea of attending the first Calgary Stampede. The prize money offered looked bigger'n Billy-be-damn, and Ed wanted to make a stake so he could go into the cow business for himself. That was in 1912 and at Calgary he got acquainted with Charlie Russell who was a great hand to make sketches of bucking horses and high-tailing cattle.

They looked the rodeo stock over together and Ed recalls that the steers were whoppin' big brutes, mostly six year-olds and weighing

[*Turn to page 8*]

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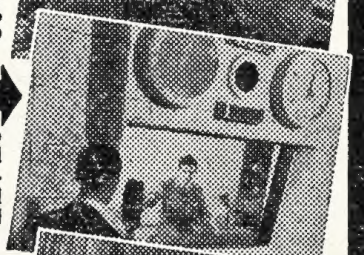

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from nine hundred to twelve hundred pounds. "They didn't rope calves in them days," Ed explained. "Just steers and full-growed ones."

The Lure of Loot

Because the prizes were so generous, the Calgary Stampede had attracted the West's top ropers, which was the department Ed excelled in.

There were all of 38 hemp twirlers on hand to compete for the pot of gold, such top hands as Clay McGonigle, Charlie Vesper, Alf Vivian, Henry Grammer and Frank Bojarques—names of such renown that young Ed wondered if maybe he hadn't wasted his entrance fees.

"It looked downright difficult," Ed recalls now. "I was a fair hand with a rope, but them fellers were all famous. Take Clay McGonigle. There never was a better roper than Clay. He was big and he was good. He had what the cowboy calls guts in more ways than one. But he never drank coffee or smoked."

Although Ed wasn't overly confident, he went in there intending to hit his best lick. And he did . . .

In order to get the fastest time on one steer, each man roped three steers. Ed tied his third one in twenty-three and four fifths seconds—and for that we won five hundred dollars.

There wasn't a happier young cowpoke in all Alberta that day. Up until then he'd never had much more than a week's wages in his pocket at one time.

Mighty Fast Money

But that was only the beginning. Ed's average for five steers was forty-four and four-fifths seconds; faster than the most famous roper had ever accomplished the chore—a world's record which won him a thousand dollars.

"I was the richest cowboy in the country that day," Ed admits with a shy grin. "Seemed like I had all the money there was. In addition to the fifteen hundred dollars I'd won a saddle worth a hundred fifty and a gold belt buckle to boot. I was sure roostin' high on the hill."

Along with all the loot, he had captured the important and coveted title of World Champion Roper . . .

Well, Ed went back to Arizona and started a little outfit of his own, the N Bar D. Then he was elected sheriff of Pima County and served five terms. His friend Will Rogers came over from California in his private plane to make a campaign speech for Ed. He landed in a town that looked like a good place for a rally, gave an enthusiastic talk in Ed's behalf, and then flew back to California.

"Trouble was," Ed explained, "Will gave his speech in Cochise County instead of Pima, so all them votes he corraled for me didn't count."

Ed's lifelong habit of wearing snug, bench-made boots and an aversion to dying with them on, undoubtedly saved his life a few years ago. He and a deputy were transporting a prisoner when the car overturned and Ed was badly busted up. Several ribs got stripped from his backbone and his right shoulder was broken, along with internal injuries.

Those Lucky Boots

The deputy, who had escaped uninjured, took one look at Ed and saw that he was dying.

Ed thought so too, and asked, "How about pullin' off my boots."

The deputy disliked doing it, knowing Ed was in terrible pain. But he felt obliged to grant a dying man's last wish. Those boots came off hard, necessitating considerable tugging and pulling.

Afterwards, much to everyone's astonishment, Ed showed signs of surviving. According to the medicos his spine was so badly crushed and the internal pressure so great that he would almost certainly have died except that the tugging it took to remove his boots had pulled his spine back into place.

But Ed wasn't thinking about that the other day when I sat with him on the patio gallery at the county courthouse. He was thinking about how it was at the Calgary Stampede . . .

"There was just three of us ropers left that made the first show," he said. "Burt Weir of Monument, New Mexico, and a Canadian named Clem Gardiner. Don't reckon I'll ever get up to that country again."

Then he grinned and said, "Them folks sure treat an old cowboy good."

Which is how it should be. • • •

PANAMINT CITY

Historical Background of This Issue's Novel

THE silver camp, Panamint City, founded in 1873, packed more deviltry into its three brief years of existence than any other mining town in the West. It was totally destroyed by a flash flood in 1875.

Located in a pocket of the arid Panamint Range overlooking Death Valley, the camp was a hideout for outlaws before one of them recognized for what it was the fabulously rich silver ore which surfaced there. But the boom town could be reached only by a twisting, narrow split in the mountain wall known as Surprise Canyon.

Capital to build a stampmill and a wagon road up Surprise Canyon was provided by two wealthy Nevada Senators—Bill Stewart and J. P. Jones, who had made their fortune in the Comstock Lode, now on the decline.

However, so lawless was Panamint City that the Senators found it impossible to ship their bullion without losing it to a gang of criminals. The problem finally was solved by smelting the silver into 450-pound cannon balls which could not be transported on muleback.

After its destruction, the camp was never fully rebuilt. since demonetization of silver bankrupted Stewart and Jones. Today, it is a ghost town, reached only by a torturous climb up Surprise Canyon, or by helicopter. There is still silver in Panamint City, and efforts have been made to reestablish the camp, money for this purpose having been furnished by New York financiers and Hollywood movie stars as late as 1947. However, the incredible difficulty in reaching the mines makes another silver boom unlikely.

Sourdough Canyon, overlooking the ruins of Panamint City, offers proof of how wild and woolly was the camp in its heyday. For here are nearly sixty graves of men who died with their boots on.

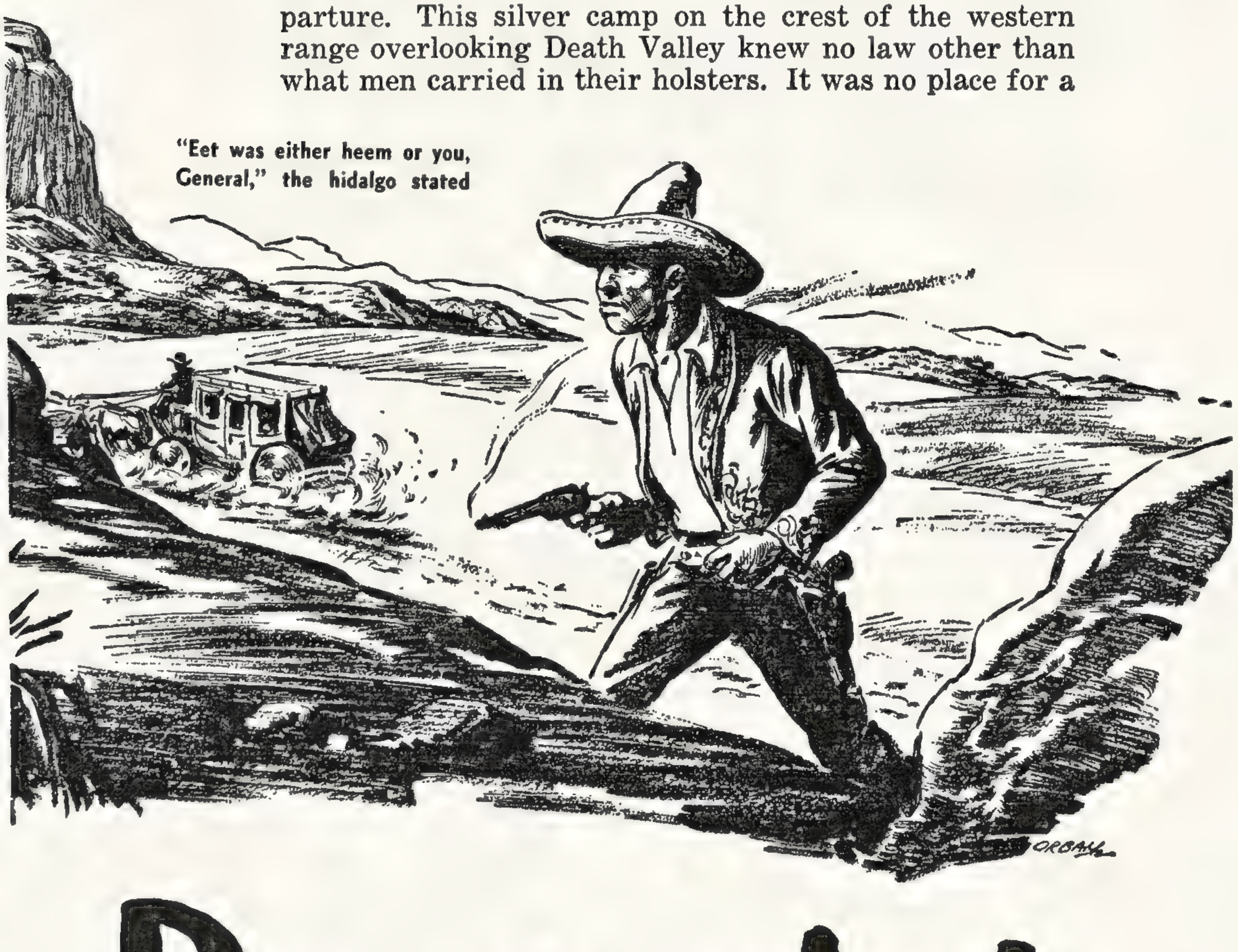
Pirates of

It would take an army, it seemed, to get the silver of Panamint City safely through Death Valley. But the Rio Kid was used to long odds

CHAPTER I

Three Shots in the Night

HAVING decided to leave Panamint City for his daughter's safety, Tom Penprose knew their lives might well depend upon the secrecy of their departure. This silver camp on the crest of the western range overlooking Death Valley knew no law other than what men carried in their holsters. It was no place for a



Panamint

a novel by WALKER A. TOMPKINS

girl. And so they left at midnight, as soon as Telescope Peak shut off the moon, riding by muleback with two burros in tow, one carrying the bar silver, the other enough grub to see them across the desert to San Bernardino's outpost of civilization.

Gus Stubblefield remained behind to work the claim. He would one day be Tom's son-in-law, and it had been Gus's idea to use the old man's failing health as an excuse to get Wavie out of Panamint.

Darkness as thick as felt had been the traveler's shield from outlaw eyes, down the steep trail of Surprise Canyon. Daylight found them crossing the alluvial fan to Postoffice Springs. The water hole was deserted—neither campers nor wagons in sight—causing Penprose to believe they were safe.

Now, at day's ending, he was not so sure.

The mules had carried them twenty miles down the alkali-crusted sink of the Panamint Valley's southern end, without their once having seen a living soul. But Tom Penprose had been uneasily aware of a dust cloud that had kept pace with them throughout the burning hours of this day, and that boded ill. They were being trailed, just out of gunshot range.

Heat waves had made it impossible for him to locate the exact source of that dust. It was like looking through window glass swimming with rainwater. It couldn't be a whirlwind, for there was no air stirring between the Slates and the Panamints today. There wasn't enough of it even to indicate a pair of tandem-hitched freight wagons southbound from the Cosos or Cerro Gordo behind twenty mules.

More likely a rider; maybe two riders.

Penprose was not concerned about the six bars of bullion in the burro pack; there was more silver where that had come from. What did concern him was his daughter Wavie, who at nineteen was an uncommonly attractive girl. Penprose couldn't keep it out of his head how the uncouth denizens of Panamint City had looked upon Wavie's beauty.

THEY were following the dust-sifted ruts of wagon tracks which would shortly join the old Borax Road out of Death Valley. Somewhere in this unmapped wasteland the pioneering Breyfogle had found and lost his fabulous lode. The legendary Gunsight Mine could well be within rifle shot of this spot where Penprose had chosen to camp.

Prudence had prompted him to leave the road and unsaddle here in a low spot between sterile dunes crested by shaggy Joshua trees. The thermometer had stood in the hundred and forties throughout this day and the baked land still radiated heat like a furnace.

Hot coffee was the best thing to cool dehydrated tissues after a trek like this today, but Penprose refused to build a fire, though there was plenty of dead mesquite available for fuel. It was then that Wavie knew her father was worried.

She was arranging her blankets under the little pup-tent Penprose always erected for her when they were out on the trail when she let her father know she guessed the reason for his strange quiet, the way he kept keening the darkness.

"Stop worrying about that silly bullion, Dad," Wavie chided him. "Once out of Surprise Canyon we were safe. Anyway, even if we were being trailed, nobody could see a campfire down in this hollow." She hadn't seen the dust following them today.

Penprose gathered up the picket lines of the four animals. The white burro carrying the silver was still saddled. In case of trouble, Penprose wanted the treasure cached well away from the camp site—an ace in the hole, a bargaining lever.

"Smoke smell drifts a long way, nights," he told his daughter. "And these Panamint Injuns still prowl this

desert country, scalp-hunting."

Wavie's laugh was soft and musical.

Nowhere else on earth did the stars shine at night as they did on this California desert, and their soft brilliance made glinting high-lights on her wheat-blonde hair as she removed her stetson and hung it on the near tent pole. In the starlight she was seductive-

CAPTAIN BOB PRYOR
The Rio Kid

ly feminine, despite the miner's shirt and boots and waist levis she wore.

Looking at her, her father was thinking, Wait till she gets to the settlements and has a chance to parade in silks and crinolines!

"How you talk, Dad!" she answered his words, not his thoughts. "This is Seventy-four! What Indians left here will be harvesting piñon nuts a mile high in the mountains, this time of year."

Penprose still didn't mention the dust clouds that had followed them down-valley. But he knew there would be no sleep for him tonight, even though Wavie had exploded his Indian theory.

"You're plumb tuckered, honey," he told her. "Sleep good. I'll turn in myself soon as I've picketed the stock over in that mesquite patch."

He left her tugging off her boots, sitting on a lava rock in front of the tent. Because one of the burros was white and could be spotted by hostile eyes over a considerable distance, he rounded the long dune rather than topping it to reach the mesquites where the mules and burros could forage for screw-beans.

The bullion pack was almost more than he could carry, after he had off-saddled the albino. The silver represented the sum total of a year's grubbing up in Surprise Valley above Panamint City. He had had his take melted down and cast into bars at the big Stewart & Jones mill.

He cached the silver deep in the mesquites, and made certain his pickets were secure. Then, rifle in hand, he climbed to the high dune overlooking their dry camp. Wavie probably was asleep down there in her tent by now. Sleep came easy to nineteen, eager to dream of love left behind.

Penprose hunkered down, conscious of the sharp pain in his chest—heart trouble, and supposedly the reason they were quitting the diggings, so many months ahead of snowfall. Wavie had been anxious to get him close to a hospital, in case he had another attack.

GUS STUBBLEFIELD knew the real reason and agreed with Penprose. A girl as lovely as Wavie had no place in a camp like Panamint. She had no business seeking the companionship of the Maiden Lane girls who plied their ancient trade in their rock-walled shacks overlooking the boom town. Gus knew that sooner or later some tough would challenge his right to Wavie's love, then Gus might wind up with a bullet or a knife in the back.

Penprose's rheumy eyes probed the scene roundabout. The stars made it unearthly beautiful here on the desert,

deceptively secure.

Westward the last traces of sundown glow burned like molten mineral in an assayer's crucible, rimming the jagged crests of the Slates with color like the edge of a day-seen moon. At his back, the dead valley stretched off and away to northward, its salt and soda deposits gleaming like cold-water lakes.

Telescope Peak, overlooking Death Valley's deep sink, still wore its snow cap, although this was August and temperatures pushed over a hundred and fifty degrees at the eastern foot of the peak. Southward lay the open reaches of the vast Mojave, ending in the rugged Calicos more than two days' travel away.

There was no breeze to rustle the scant vegetation. No coyotes bayed from remote ridges. The silence was complete. All a man could hear was the coursing of blood in his own eardrums. Desert nights in California always reminded Tom Penprose of a half-forgotten phrase of Scripture—"Peace that passeth understanding."

He reached for his pipe and tobacco sack, then checked his impulse to smoke. In this clear desert air a match flame could be seen for miles. And Tom Penprose could not shake off the feeling that hostile eyes were probing this country tonight, searching for a glow that would mark a campfire.

Sleep pulled at his eyelids. He snapped open the lid of his gold hunting-case watch and starlight showed him that it was three hours short of midnight. They had been in saddle better than twenty hours today.

Penprose told himself, "I'll let her sleep three hours, then we hit the trail again. Make it to Granite Wells and camp in the shade during the heat. Another night should see us at Black's Ranch above Barstow. Day and a half over Cajon Pass to San Berdoo. Wavie can do it if I can."

Wavie had shared her father's quest for a lucky strike since her baby days. She had been born in a log shanty over on the Mother Lode in '54 and her mother had died before she was a year old. Since then Wavie had traveled with old Tom, finding in him both a father and a mother. They had seen the Comstock at the height of its boom; it was natural that they had joined the stampede to the Panamints.

Both of them had struck it rich in Surprise Valley. Tom Penprose, finding his ledge and developing it before Senators Bill Stewart and J. P. Jones had built their stamp mill there, knew this strike more than made up for the ill luck that had dogged his footsteps ever since he and his bride had left Ohio by covered wagon, heading for El Dorado in '49.

And Wavie had met August Stubblefield in Panamint. Gus was only twenty, but he was cut the right way of the leather. A hoosier from the Wabash country, he had driven a jerkline team of mules into Panamint City a year ago, working for a freight outfit out of Bakersfield.

He had quit his job to be near Wavie Penprose. Love at first sight. Old Tom knew it could happen that way. It had happened to him, back in Ohio, and now his mate slept beneath the sugar pines in the little cemetery at Mariposa, a world away from the land of her birth.

Something was disturbing the mules down in the mesquites. Tom Penprose came to his feet, momentarily wondering if he could have drifted off to sleep.

HE GLANCED down into the swale where Wavie was asleep in the puptent. Then he gave the stock his sharp attention, and started skidding down the sandy slope toward the mesquites, his .45-70 Springfield held like the balancing rod of a trapeze artist.

"Most likely spooked by a rattler," he muttered. Snakes would be out on a night like this.

The mules were still blowing nervously when he reached the thicket, his ear cocked for the *whirr* of a sidewinder. Instead, he heard the dry, metallic

double click of metal which was a revolver coming to full cock. He knew he was as good as dead when he heard the voice from the clotted dark:

"You're a mite careless with bullion for an old-timer, Tom."

Penprose recognized that slurring, gravelly voice. Hardrock Wilbur, a prospector who had quit mining for the steadier wages of a mulewacker with the Meyerstein & Co. wagons out of San Berdoo. A former Union soldier, it was now whispered that he was a member of the wild bunch, the secret society known as the "Pirates of Panamint."

Wilbur came into view, starshine glinting on the leveled bore of his Dragoon. Behind him, boots crunched on sand, and Tom recognized another Meyerstein waggoner—Pedro Escobar. Recognized him by his fancy gaucho pants and steeple-crowned sombrero with the ball tassels around the brim. Escobar was toting the silver packs.

Penprose had seen these drivers in camp yesterday when they had arrived with freight from San Bernardino. Tomorrow they would be heading out of the Panamints with their wagons again. They had taken advantage of their off-duty time to go on this bushwhack hunt.

"Seen your dust after I pulled out of Postoffice Springs this morning, Wilbur," Penprose said heavily. "Take the silver and vamose."

Escobar came out from under the 'squites, shoulders sagging under the weight of the bullion-laden pack-saddles.

The Mexican's teeth flashed whitely as he said, "Senorita Wavie ees not here?"

In the warm night Tom Penprose felt a chill coast down his spine. He could not buy his life with silver bars tonight, for these mule-whackers intended to kill him, to prevent the news of this bushwhack robbery from getting out. Had they intended to spare his life they would have worn masks. But Wavie—she must not fall into the hands of these ruffians!

"His girl's with him, Pedro," Wilbur said. "Where's your camp, Tom?"

Penprose was weighing his chances of getting his .45-70 around to match Wilbur's gun drop. It was impossible. Wilbur had only to reach out an arm to block the arc of the long barrel.

Yet he had to warn Wavie, wake her up. Any moment might be his last. He had taught his daughter the classic distress signal of the frontier, that three shots meant danger. And gunshots would be his only way of awakening her, giving her a chance to make a getaway before this pair of teamsters went on the prowl.

"Speak up!" snapped Hardrock Wilbur. "Where's the girl?"

Penprose's rifle was pointing groundward as he pulled the trigger. The thunder of the shot swallowed up the point-blank roar of the renegade's big-bored pistol.

Wilbur's slug hit the old man in the stomach and knocked him down. Falling, he clawed the ancient Spiller & Burr pistol out of his belt and fired it with the last strength left to him, pulled the trigger without aiming at any definite target.

Three shots volleyed and echoed across the desert wastes.

Wilbur holstered his gun. No use wasting ammunition on a corpse.

Wavie Penprose's pup-tent was empty when the two freighters located it, minutes later. Bare footprints led off into the night. In her panicked flight, Wavie had left her boots behind.

But she carried a shotgun, and she knew flight was risky. Instinctively she knew old Tom was dead. Now, like a wild bird, hidden in a motte of creosote less than fifty yards away, she listened to the two men talking as they scouted the sink below, tracking her. She could not see their faces, but she could see that one renegade wore a faded blue army uniform, and that the other was a Mexican in gaudy *gaucho* trappings.

"She no go far weethout the boots,

senor. We find her."

"Around camp she always packed a gun, pardner. Ain't worth the risk. We'll play it safe. Shoot her mules and take her boots. Afoot, she won't live to see the sunset *mañana*. Come on—*vamanos*.

A TARDY moon lifted its horns over the Armagosa Desert an hour later. Its pale gleam helped Wavie Penprose scoop out a shallow grave and collect rocks enough to cover her father's body as protection against the buzzards which would scavenge the carcasses of the dead animals with the coming of tomorrow's sun.

She was out of her head the following afternoon, wandering in circles on the blistering soda flats of Panamint Valley. Her unshod feet were bloody when she was discovered by the swamper and driver of one of Remi Nadeau's ore wagons from the Cerro Gordo mines.

These men could not fathom why a delirious, barefoot girl should be headed toward the north, but her one lucid thought had been to get back to Gus Stubblefield in Panamint City. Her rescuers could make no sense of her insane babblings about a soldier and a Mexican and three shots in the night that had roused her from sleep.

"Loco from sunstroke," the mule-whacker diagnosed. "Take it easy with the canteen, Slim. Best thing we can do is take her to San Berdoo and a doc. If she dies, we'll bury her. Wonder who she is—and why in hell she's wandering in the desert alone thisaway?"

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CHAPTER II

San Bernardino

LIGE SEARLES, the fat sheriff of San Bernardino County, sat in the anteroom of Dr. Mort Stiles's office and cursed, for the thousandth time, the destiny that had brought him West to wear a law badge. Back in Missouri he had been a marshal in a town of a thousand-odd souls; here in California the county under his jurisdiction was the largest in the United States, its twenty thousand square miles almost equalling the area of Massachusetts, Connecticut and Rhode Island. He couldn't see it all in a lifetime.

Saloon brawls he could handle. Manhunts out in the burning desert were common to Sheriff Searles' routine. But this was the first time he had ever been called upon to solve a murder involving a survivor as beautiful as this golden-haired girl who had been brought in by one of Remi Nadeau's ore-freighting outfits two days ago.

"The killing happened in Inyo County anyway," Searles grumbled under his tobacco-stained mustache. "Why couldn't them dim-witted whackers have hauled her to some other county seat?"

The door opened and Doc Stiles came in, his ruddy face oozing perspiration, a stethoscope dangling from his neck.

"Her story's the same today as it was yesterday, Lige," the doctor said wearily. "She is entirely coherent now. But it was a close thing. Her feet will heal up. But I've known the sun to fry a person's brains so they never recover their reason."

Searles grumbled testily, "I am getting nowhere on this case, Doc. I talked to them teamsters before they lined out for San Pedro. All they know is she kept mumbling about her Dad being kilt by

two desperadoes, and something about three gunshots. Crazy as a loon, all the way in. Any idea who she is yet?"

The physician handed Searles a scrap of paper.

"She couldn't recall her name, but when I handed her this she wrote it automatically. Wavie Penprose. She and her father were en route from the Panamint diggings to San Berdoo when they were jumped on the trail by renegades. It seems they were packing out some bar silver. That's what the killers were after."

The sheriff muttered, "If she's as perty as you say she is, she's lucky they let her off alive. Where'd this killing take place? Outside of my county, I know, but where exactly?"

Stiles shrugged. "Her memory isn't too clear yet. If Remi Nadeau's teamsters hadn't happened across her she would have been dead of sunstroke. It seems her father was attacked some distance from their camp. He fired three shots to wake her up and warn her of danger. She made her getaway—plucky girl."

The sheriff pondered this information gravely. As near as he could find out from the waggoneers, the murder had occurred more than a week ago, far to the north.

"I'll talk to the girl when she wakes up," Searles said, "but lot of good it'll do, outside of my county and all. The killers could be clean to 'Frisco by now. Cold trail. And her not sure of her facts."

The doctor said gently, "She is sure of her facts, Sheriff, or I wouldn't have called you in. She saw the killers. One was a Mexican in a Fancy-Dan hidalgo outfit. The other was wearing a Union army uniform."

Sheriff Searles stood up to leave. "Description don't help a damn. Ex-soldiers are a dime a dozen. Same with Mexicans. Besides, this thing happened outside of my jurisdiction."

Doctor Stiles shook his head.

"The girl was picked up less than five miles inside the Inyo County boundary marker, Sheriff. I have an idea the killing was done at the extreme north end of San Bernardino County. In which case apprehending the killers is your responsibility. The grave of her father from her description of it, should be easily located—only a hundred yards or so off the road leading into Panamint Valley. I have a hunch it will be found in your county."

SEARLES clapped on his hat and hitched up his gun harness.

"Panamint City, you say the gal is from?" he inquired.

"Yes. Her fiance is there now. Her father owned a rich silver claim there."

The Sheriff chuckled. "Speaking of Panamint reminds me—that Nevada senator, Bill Stewart, is in town. Seems his silver bullion is piling up at his mill and he can't fetch her out. Too many bandits. He's over at Wells-Fargo this morning, tryin' to talk the express company into running stages into Panamint City."

Doc Stiles chuckled. "Senator Stewart is a wealthy man," he commented. "His partner, Senator Jones, is worth around twenty million. But I doubt if even all that money can buy a Wells-Fargo franchise to Panamint. The camp's too tough for Wells-Fargo or any other such outfit to handle."

Sheriff Lige Searles left the doctor's office and clumped downstairs, out into the punishing heat which made San Bernardino's adobe and frame buildings appear to tremble like mounds of melting jelly.

Across B Street, a red-and-yellow Concord stage was making up in front of Wells-Fargo, ready for its daily run to Los Angeles. Inside that adobe station, Searles knew that one of the West's richest men, Senator Bill Stewart of Nevada, was fighting a losing battle with the express company, seeking to find a way to transport Panamint silver to the mint.

The reputation of Panamint City was

well-known here in 'Berdoo. It was a camp without a jail, without a lawman. Its evil was said to pale anything that had ever been known in Virginia City or Cripple Creek, or up in the Alder Gulch mines of Montana ten years back. No man was safe where the "Pirates" operated.

Wells-Fargo, the Sheriff realized, would be wise to keep their stages out of Surprise Canyon, no matter what Senators Stewart and Jones offered them in fees to carry their bullion to the outside world.

Sheriff Searles was heading for the relative comfort of his jailhouse office when he caught sight of two riders moving up B Street, flanking the rows of tall, yellow-skirted palms. Ordinarily, at this time of day, riders kept off the streets; the heat was too intense for travel. Knowing that, Searles gave particular attention to the approaching riders.

The one in the lead rode a line-back dun cavalry horse, one of the "breed that never dies"; the other bestrode a coal-black stallion, lather-drenched flanks gray with the dust of the desert. Both riders were covered with an overall neutral caking of pinkish dust which told the sheriff that they had lately crossed the frowning heights of the Cajon.

The riders were abreast of Searles before his jaded eyes got around to sizing up their garments. Then he saw that the man riding the dun wore an army campaign hat, blue tunic, and yellow-striped U. S. Cavalry pants.

His companion on the black, a handsome young Mexican in his early thirties, was decked out in the gold-braided *charro* jacket, flare-bottomed *pantalones* and broad-brimmed Chihuahua sombrero of a high-born *hidalgo*. No slovenly California *mestizo* was this rider. His array branded him as a son of Old Mexico, a type not commonly seen in San Bernardino.

Lige Searles was a big man who, especially in this late-summer heat, moved with a big man's sluggish gait. But he moved rapidly now, walking out to intercept the strange riders.

"Hold up, gents. I make it a practice to make *habla* with folks who ride into my burg. I'm Lige Searles, sheriff of the county."

The riders reined up, grinning down at the lawman. Searles saw that they were heavily armed. Both had Winchesters in their saddle scabbards, the soldier's weapon being one of the new '73 model Winchester lever-action repeaters which had come on the market only a year ago. In addition, he carried a pair of Colt .45 revolvers in holsters at either flank.

THE Mexican's girth was similiarly girdled with cartridge harness and holstered six-shooters. But such accoutrements in this country were too common to have any special meaning.

"Yes?" the man in army garb said courteously. "We had hoped the first man we would greet in your city would be either the proprietor of a bath house or a restaurant chef, but if it's the custom to clear with the law first, we will be glad to oblige."

Searles' scarred hand dropped to the cedar butt of his own six-gun as he met the level strike of the soldier's blue-eyed stare. At his stirrup, the young *hidalgo* cuffed back his sombrero and fanned himself with the flap of a rainbow-hued serape hung over his shoulder.

"Who are you and where you been?" demanded the sheriff.

The soldier hipped around in saddle, scowling slightly at the hostility in the lawman's voice. The twin bars of a captain glinted on his shoulder straps.

"My name is Pryor—Robert Pryor," he said. "My amigo is Celestino Mireles. We are from Texas."

Searles' florid face took on a harsh cast.

"Texas?" he growled. "That's a right far piece of ground away from San Bernardino, California. What brings you west?"

Wilbur's slug hit the old man in the stomach and knocked him down

Pryor shrugged. "We've been roaming the country ever since I was mustered out of the Army in Sixty-five, Sheriff. Right now we are on our way to Mexico to visit friends of Celestino's.

Searles pondered this information briefly. "You come over Cajon Pass lately?"

Both riders nodded. "We're on our way south from Fort McDermitt, Nevada, sir," Bob Pryor said politely. "Occasionally I work for the Army in an unofficial status. We recently spent some time around Virginia City hunting a bandit who lifted an army payroll over in Nevada."

Searles' eyes were shining now like a bloodhound's on a hot trail.

"South from the Comstock Lode country, eh? That means you lately been in the Death Valley country?"

"This time of the year, we by-passed the Big Sink, of course. Crossed Mojave Desert. I'd just as soon walk barefoot through a bake oven."

Without warning, Sheriff Lige Searles lifted his Colt .45 from leather. He gestured with the gun as he said, "Light and cool your saddles. I want you to come across the street to Doc Stiles' office. He's got a patient there I want you to see, and vicy versy."

CHAPTER III

Hangnoose Shadow

BOB PRYOR and Celestino exchanged puzzled glances. Then they shrugged and dismounted. In a bantering tone the young Mexican said, "The sheriffs, they always make trobble for the Rio Kid, that ees for *seguro*."

Searles' brows shot up. "The Rio Kid? You ain't meaning the Rio Kid who scouted for Custer and Sheridan and Grant in the War Between the States, are you?"

Pryor was leading his dun pony over to a nearby hitchrack, Mireles following him. When the horses were taken care of Pryor turned to the sheriff, noting that Searles' belligerency had subsided somewhat.

"I had the honor," he said modestly, of serving with the generals you mentioned. When the war was over and I went back home to Texas, I found that Border guerillas had murdered my parents and laid waste my home ranch on the Rio Grande. The same thing happened to Celestino here. We've been riding together ever since, fighting lawlessness wherever we find it—the only thing we could do in memory of our martyred parents."

Searles tugged at his handlebar mustache uncertainly. Then he shoved his gun back into holster.

"If you're the Rio Kid," he said, "I'm barking at the wrong coons, that's certain. At Gettysburg myself, until I got a Rebel minnie-ball in the guts—But I got my duty to do. Step in along with me."

The Rio Kid and Celestino Mireles, grinning good-naturedly at a delay which they could not begin to understand, fell in step with the pompous sheriff of San Bernardino and were escorted across the street and into a doctor's office.

Even as Searles introduced his visitors to the white-headed old medico, Pryor saw the look of consternation that crossed Stiles' face. Something else he couldn't understand.

"She is awake," the doctor said to Searles. "The opiates have not had time to take effect as yet. Miss Penprose should at least be able to—make an identification, or otherwise."

The sheriff stood back, motioning for Pryor and the young Mexican to follow the doctor. Stiles stepped across the office, visibly agitated, and opened a door leading into a bedroom.

"Just a minute, gentlemen!" the Rio Kid protested. "What is this? The sheriff started out by throwing a gun on us—we deserve some sort of explanation?"

Searles coughed apologetically. "Routine, Cap'n Pryor. They was a killing over in the desert. Couple fellers sort of answering the descriptions of you and your amigo. The dead man's daughter is resting up after being left afoot out in the Mojave a week ten-days ago. It's nothing to worry about—providing you're the Rio Kid, as you say!"

Pryor and Celestino stepped into a dimly lighted room. They saw someone lying in a white-sheeted bed, a girl whose burnished golden tresses framed a face gaunted but still a shadow of striking beauty.

Dr. Stiles, at the window, ran up the blind. The girl in the bed blinked in the sudden light, her blue eyes searching the doctor questioningly.

The Rio Kid moved to the foot of the bed, his dust-covered hat with its yellow cavalry cords doffed. Celestino moved to his elbow, sombrero in hand, staring at the girl in puzzlement. Neither of them had ever seen before.

"Miss Penprose," the doctor said quietly, "the sheriff has apprehended a pair of suspects. If you could tell us whether they are the murderers of your father—"

Wavie Penprose's head turned on the pillow, her eyes shuttling between Captain Pryor and young Mireles. And then, sitting bolt upright, she clapped a wasted hand to her mouth and gave a soul-chilling scream.

"Yes—yes!" she cried shrilly. "The soldier! And the Mexican! They killed Dad!"

THE girl slumped back on her pillow, unconscious. Doc Stiles stepped swiftly to her side with a vial of smelling salts. The Rio Kid turned to face Lige Searles, who was tonguing his cheek thoughtfully, his eyes on the girl's chalk-white face.

"You can't believe the testimony of a girl who's obviously delirious," the Rio Kid said tensely. "She isn't responsible."

Searles said, "Been thinking. All I got is your word you're the famous Rio Kid, son. Any way of proving same?"

Pryor unbuttoned his army tunic and took out a wallet.

"Here is my captain's commission, signed by Lincoln. I have credentials signed by President Grant proving I am Robert Pryor. The Rio Kid—that is merely a nickname that was given me in the Rio Grande country, Sheriff."

Searles lifted his six-shooter from holster.

"Name of Pryor means nothing to me, son. Miss Penprose has identified you as her father's killers. You and Mireles there can consider yourselves under arrest."

San Bernardino's jail was a bake oven in the basement of the adobe courthouse. It was fetid with the odor of unwashed bodies of former occupants, of tobacco and chamber pots and accumulated filth on the unswept bullpen floor.

The thermometer had not dropped lower than ninety degrees during the five days and nights Celestino and Bob Pryor had occupied adjoining cells. Now, stripped to the waist for what relief they could get from the stupefying heat, they regarded their noontime food trays without appetite.

They were sick, mentally, if not physically. Neither had visited this settlement on the edge of the California orange belt before; they were total strangers here, without friends to call upon for aid.

It was bad enough that their arrests had been predicated on the flimsy identification of a young woman who, at the time of seeing them in Doc Stiles' makeshift hospital, had herself but recently emerged from the pit of delirium. If Wavie Penprose should die as a result of her ordeal on the desert, hangrope would be the inevitable end for the two riders for justice.

They roused from a drowsy torpor when they heard voices in Searles' outer office. Keys jangled in the bullpen door and the fleshy San Berdoo sheriff appeared in the opening.

"Get your shirts on and look halfway decent, hombres!" the lawman snapped. "Doc's brought Miss Penprose down for another look at you. She's admitted she ain't positive in her identification."

New hope welled in the two men as they hastily donned their clothing. Lige Searles was a reasonable man. He was not keeping them incarcerated in this bake oven through any sadistic whim; he had his duty to perform, as he reminded them almost daily.

Searles turned back into his office and grunted, "They're ready, ma'am. Don't be nervous. Take all the time you want to make up your mind."

Bob Pryor and Celestino Mireles were standing at the barred doors of their cells as Dr. Stiles entered the stuffy bullpen, accompanied by Wavie Penprose. The doctor's wife had gone shopping with the girl and as a result she was decked out in a colorful calico print which accentuated the firm swell of her young breasts, the curved line of her slim waist and hips. She had a red rose in the golden sheen of her hair which was caught back in a neat chignon and topped by a shepherdess bonnet.

Color was back in her face, but the

ravages of her recent experiences were still evident in the hollows of her cheeks, the blue shadows under her eyes, and the pinch of her nostrils.

Sunlight shafting through an iron-grated window fell full upon the Rio Kid and Celestino Mireles. They met her frightened gaze levelly. Pryor conscious of the fact that he had not shaved in two days, realized that he must appear like a ruffian in her eyes.

WAVIE'S hand clung to the doctor's arm as she studied the handsome young cavalry captain and his Mexican companion. Warm color flooded her face and a pulse ticked rapidly on the sun-tanned column of her throat.

"May I—ask them a few questions, Doctor?" she asked hesitantly.

Stiles nodded. "Of course, my dear. Their lives are in your hands. Do not let pity alter your convictions, but remember—your words could send these men to the gallows."

Wavie Penprose came forward until she was within arm's length of Pryor's cell.

"Were you gentlemen anywhere around the Panamint Mountains on the twenty-first of August?" she asked. "The date Dad—died?"

The Rio Kid back-tracked in his mind. The five days they had spent in this foul jail, waiting for Wavie to recover her strength, had seemed like an eternity and had upset his sense of passing time.

"We left Virginia City on the eleventh," he finally said. "I cannot at the moment recall our whereabouts on the twenty-first, Miss Penprose. But I can tell you this—we followed the east wall of the Sierra Nevadas south to the Mojave. At no time were we closer than a hundred miles to the Panamint Range. And we arrived here in San Bernardino on the twenty-ninth—the day you accused us of murdering your father."

Sheriff Searles asked hoarsely, "Any way of proving you took the route you did, Pryor?"

The Rio Kid spread his hands helplessly. "No. We passed prospectors and freighting outfits on the way down, yes. But they are all nameless to us, as we are to them. We were trying to reach the Mexican border by the closest possible route." He turned his eyes back to Wavie. "The sheriff has told us your story, Miss Penprose," he said gently. "Let me point out that it was night when you saw your father's killers. The fact that one was a Mexican and the other an ex-soldier is an unfortunate coincidence so far as Celestino and I are concerned. But do our voices resemble the voices of the murderers? Were the killers riding the same type of horses we ride?"

Wavie averted her gaze. "I—didn't see their horses, except at a distance. Your—voice—sounds like that of the man who killed Dad. Deep. I don't know—I don't know!"

Searles elbowed past her, his eyes aflame behind their greasy hammocks of flesh.

"You weren't packing any bar silver when I picked up your horses the other day," the sheriff bit out. "Maybe I can make a deal with you, Pryor. A good word to the judge if you tell me where you cached that bullion. Out on the desert? On the Cajon?"

The Rio Kid said angrily, "Don't influence the girl with your innuendo, Sheriff. In these United States a man is considered innocent until proved guilty. Miss Wavie, are you still of the opinion Celestino and I murdered your father?"

Suddenly the girl buried her face on the doctor's shoulder.

"I—I'm almost positive—they are the killers," she sobbed brokenly. "That's—all I can say. I will never be—absolutely sure!"

Doc Stiles escorted her out of the cell block. Sheriff Lige Searles' ham-sized fists opened and closed. He said in a frustrated monotone, "As long as they's a shadow of a doubt in her mind, a jury wouldn't hang you, Pryor. Your trial

comes up tomorrow. I'll lay odds you'll draw penitentiary terms, not a rope."

He stalked out of the bullpen and locked the iron door behind him.

The Rio Kid and Celestino stared at that barrier with panic putting its acrid taste in their mouths. If Wavie Penprose was not sure of their innocence now, she never would be. Her brain was lucid, her memory as fresh as it would ever be. Yet her testimony could damn them!

"Tino," the Rio Kid said hoarsely, "we've never been in a worse tight than now. It shows you what circumstantial evidence can do to innocent men. Even if that girl admits her doubts about us in court tomorrow—as I am sure she will—we stand to spend a good hunk of our lives behind bars."

THROUGH the outer window they saw Doc Stiles taking the girl back to his home. She was still sobbing uncontrollably.

"General," Celestino whispered, using the only name by which he ever called his companion of the trails, "eef we ever get out of thees *juzgado* we must track down her *padre's* keelers."

But Celestino's voice held no hope. During their interminable days and nights in this fetid calaboose, the young *hidalgo* had until now refused to be worried about their predicament, feeling sure that Wavie Penprose herself would eventually recover her memory and absolve them. Now that last hope seemed quenched.

With a scrap of paper and pencil, the Rio Kid began back-tracking day by day in his memory, jotting down their various camps—Mono Lake and Independence, the Lone Pine water hole and Granite Wells, Indian Wells, Black's Ranch, Hunnington's Station in Cajon Pass.

"'Tino," he said suddenly, "I've got it! Wavie's father was murdered on the night of August twenty-first. According to my check, that was the night we camped near Mount Whitney."

Celestino's eyes narrowed reflectively.

"Si! that was the night we camped near the rich senor who was driving the herd of *caballos* to Southern California."

Hope began reluctantly to revive in his worried dark eyes.

CHAPTER IV

"Lucky" Baldwin

THE Rio Kid and his Mexican companion each now had a vivid memory of that camp at the Lone Pine water hole. Each recalled how the owner of a herd of thoroughbred horses, en route to a hacienda near San Gabriel Mission, had chatted with them briefly. The Rio Kid had satisfied the wealthy horseman's curiosity as to which of the Sierra Nevada crags was Mount Whitney. For although it was the highest point of ground in America, it was always difficult to identify, since lesser peaks appeared higher because of perspective angles.

At the very moment he had been pointing out Whitney to that horse owner, Wavie Penprose might have been enduring her ordeal a hundred-odd miles to the east!

Now that the details were returning clearly to the Rio Kid's mind, he even recalled a story the chance acquainance of the water hole had told them about the source of his vast fortune, only recently achieved.

"They call me 'Lucky,' " the man had said, "and for good cause. I came out from Indiana in Fifty-two, just an ordinary Hoosier horse trader, and set up in the livery business in San Francisco. A feller owed me some money. Said he couldn't pay me in cash, but that he owned some Nevada mining stock he'd

give me. Consolidated Virginia, it was called. Name meant nothing on the Stock Exchange at the time. Anyhow, I took the stock. Left on a big-game hunt to India with some British sportsmen. Told my broker to sell this stock when it hit what I paid for it, only I forgot to give him the key to my safe. While I was gone, they struck the Big Bonanza on Mt. Davidson—this was only last March, you understand.

"Well, when my ship got back to San Francisco, my broker was waiting for me at the dock. Said it was lucky I hadn't left the key to my safe so he couldn't sell that Con Virginia stock. My shares, he says, had got valuable. Handed me a copy of the *Alta*. Found out my stock was worth three million. Now how's that for a freak of luck, gentlemen?"

It was a fantastic story, one that had stuck in the Rio Kid's mind. But the name of the man who had told it had escaped his memory. The name of the man who, if he could be reached, would be their alibi for their whereabouts the night Tom Penprose was murdered.

"Ai-i-i, I remember the hombre so well," Celestino reminisced. "I admired hees horses and he even offered me the job on hees rancho. But hees name, I do not remember."

Sundown was tempering the torturous heat of the jail several hours later when the jailer brought their supper trays to them. As usual, their food was accompanied by a copy of San Bernardino's small newspaper, the *Daily Guardian*.

An omnivorous reader whenever the leisure time presented itself to him, the Rio Kid had kept his sanity by devouring every news item and advertisement in the *Guardian*.

Three days ago, the paper had published a somewhat embroidered account of their arrest for the suspected murder of Tom Penprose, a Panamint City miner, up on the north edge of the Mojave. Tonight, reading by the feeble rays of the smoky cellblock lantern, the Rio Kid searched the newspaper columns to see what the editor had to say about their murder trial before a circuit-riding judge on the morrow.

He found only the briefest mention of their case in the courthouse section. Senator Bill Stewart's visit to the town occupied the bulk of the headlines. But on the front page, another headline in bold type arrested Bob Pryor's attention:

FABULOUS LUCKY BALDWIN A VISITOR HERE

Celestino Mireles, in the next cell, heard his partner's sudden gasp of excitement. The young Mexican looked up curiously. The Rio Kid's hands were shaking.

"Que es?"

"'Tino," Pryor said in an excited whisper, "listen to this:"

> San Bernardino is getting more than its share of celebrities this week. In addition to Senator Stewart, of Nevada, the San Gorgonio Hotel has as its guest the noted Elias Jackson Baldwin, San Francisco pioneer, who is en route to his newly acquired Spanish ranch near San Gabriel Mission with a herd of blooded horses.
>
> Baldwin, better known by his nickname of "Lucky," was made a millionaire in a most unusual manner. Owning a block of shares in Con Virginia silver mines, he netted a profit of $3,000,000 on a minor investment.
>
> Mr. Baldwin is a racehorse breeder. He has acquired Rancho Santa Anita for the express purpose of horse raising. He will be a guest at the San Gorgonio until Tuesday of this week, while his remuda of blooded racers are being reshod.

"Caramba!" Celestino whispered when the Rio Kid had finished reading. "Lucky Baldween! That ees the name of the hombre who could not tell wheech mountain was Wheetney!"

THE Rio Kid leaped to his feet, took a tin cup from his untouched supper tray, and began hammering on the bars of his cell.

After a few moments of the deafening clatter, the bullpen door opened and Lige Searles wedged his beefy figure through the entrance.

"Cut it out, damn you!" the sheriff

groused. "You gone loco with the heat, Pryor?"

Breathing heavily, the Rio Kid said, "Listen, Sheriff! You've heard of Lucky Baldwin, the mining magnate?"

Searles nodded. "Reckon."

"I want you to hustle over to the San Gorgonio Hotel and bring Mr. Baldwin over here, Sheriff! And I want Miss Penprose to come with him."

The sheriff turned on his heel, waving a fat palm at his prisoner in a derisive gesture.

"Now I *know* you've gone loco. What would a millionaire like Lucky Baldwin want to see you for? He ain't a lawyer."

The Rio Kid laughed uncontrollably. "Lucky Baldwin," he told the sheriff, "is the man who's going to prove that Celestino and I had nothing to do with that Panamint prospector's murder the night of the twenty-first, Sheriff. Lucky

CELESTINO MIRELES

Baldwin is our alibi! The sheriff's *got* to let us see him!"

Lounging on the open balcony of his deluxe suite in San Bernardino's leading hostelry, the San Gorgonio, Elias Baldwin sipped his mint julep and let his eyes rest on the magenta highlands of the towering peak which had given the hotel its name.

A man who prided himself only on being an expert judge of horseflesh, and with no sybaritic tastes, Baldwin had never been able to accustom himself to such luxury as was now his. It was difficult for him to forget that only two short years before he had slept in vermin-infested bunkhouses on cattle ranches and in mining camps, and with no thought of dissatisfaction. Yet now, by the vagaries of a fate which throughout his life had smiled on him repeatedly, Lucky Baldwin was basking in a fifty-dollar-a-day suite, walking on oriental rugs in rooms fit for a king with their crystal chandeliers and gold-framed mirrors, their tapestry-covered walls and ornate gilded furniture.

Such luck might not last forever, of course. The mines in Nevada could peter out. There was already talk that the new diggings at Panamint City would outclass the Comstock, next year or the year after that.

Lucky Baldwin had been to Panamint City and he had not been too impressed. For he had seen the lawlessness there as well as the fifty-foot seams of native silver lying on the surface. But the claims were all staked out, up in Surprise Valley. It was just as well. A man's life was too cheap there since the mysterious ruffians of the Panamint Pirate's gang had started preying on the camp.

A discreet knock sounded at the door of Baldwin's suite, but the rich man was lost in thought, out here on the breeze-swept balcony, where the air was redolent with the scent of outlying orange groves. Any man who had just made the torturous crossing of the Mojave Desert, as Baldwin had done, could do with a little luxury like this, he was thinking.

He also was thinking, Silver veins can pinch out, but not my Santa Anita ranch. That will be my prize always. This country is booming. The ranch will boom with it. I'll be breeding prize

race horses long after speculators like Senator Jones and Senator Stewart are bankrupt, with nothing but politics to fall back on. It's a great life.

The knocking became more insistent, and Elias Baldwin came out of his reverie with a start, spilling on his robe some of the cool drink he held in his hand.

He stood up, casting a last glance over the tawdry adobes of the settlement, and padded on slippered feet across the deep-piled rug in his sitting room.

CANDLES, glowing softly in wall scones of furbished gold, showed Lucky Baldwin to be a tall, spare man, hardened by his years of living in the West, the slight warp of his legs testifying to his time spent in saddle. A brown mustache overshadowed a humorous mouth. In his pale blue eyes was always a twinkle, no matter whether the tide of his fortunes was ebbing or flowing.

Knotting the belt of his robe about his lean midriff, Baldwin opened the door, expecting to see no one more interesting than a porter bringing him a pitcher of ice water.

Instead he saw an oddly contrasted quartette standing at his door. Beefy Lige Searles, Sheriff of San Bernardino, was known to Baldwin, but the other two men and the girl with them were strangers. The girl took his eye first, for next to a fine horse Baldwin had an eye for a lovely woman.

Flanking her were a tall, strikingly handsome man in dusty regimental blues of the Union Army, and a Mexican decked out in the *charro* costume such as the vaqueros wore on Baldwin's newly acquired ranch at Santa Anita, during fiesta time.

"Pardon the intrusion, Mr. Baldwin, sir," Sheriff Searles apologized, "but this here's a matter of life or death."

Baldwin bowed courteously, inviting them in. The young woman, introduced as Miss Wavie Penprose, accepted a seat on a heavily upholstered sofa. Baldwin was quick to notice that she sat there anxiously, on the edge of the cushion, her hands twisting a handkerchief in her lap.

Searles slumped into a chair facing her, while the soldier and the *hidalgo*, as yet unintroduced, stood with hats in hand, their eyes burning into Baldwin's.

"Shall I ring for mint juleps?" Lucky Baldwin asked courteously. "Perhaps sarsaparilla for you, miss?"

Sheriff Searles shook his head, mopping his thick-creased, brick-red neck with a bandanna.

"This is business, Mr. Baldwin. It's like this. Miss Penprose's father, a Panamint miner, was bushwhacked out near Windy Gap south of Death Valley a couple weeks back."

Baldwin turned shocked eyes on the girl, who looked away, her cheeks pale.

"I'm sorry to hear that," Baldwin said huskily. "Is there any way I can help?"

Searles saw the Rio Kid open his mouth to speak and silenced him with a savage gesture.

"Just keep your lip hobbled, son," the lawman snapped. "Mr. Baldwin, take a good look at this here soldier and this Mexican. You ever seen this pair before?"

Lucky Baldwin turned his attention to the standing men. At once a grin flickered under his brown mustache.

"I'm a poor hand at remembering names," he said, "but I sure remember these fellows' faces. Can't recollect just where I've seen 'em, Sheriff, but I've seen 'em. Maybe at my Santa Anita rancho?"

The sheriff's eyes flickered like polished gunmetal. He saw Miss Penprose look up, her eyes fixed on Bob Pryor's sweat-rimed features. A knot of muscle chewed at the hinge of Pryor's jaw. Celestino's dark eyes were fixed on Baldwin, his expression grave, inscrutable.

"It's mighty darned important that you recall where you seen 'em, Mr. Baldwin," Searles said. "They claim they were with you the night Tom Penprose was shot. Unless you can verify

that, these men stand to face a judge and jury tomorrow, charged with murder."

Lucky Baldwin rubbed his jaw thoughtfully. "Just when were you supposed to be with me, Captain?" he asked Pryor.

THE Rio Kid glanced at the sheriff, who again signaled him to remain silent.

"I'll drop this much of a clue, Mr. Baldwin," Searles volunteered. "What we're trying to do is establish an alibi for this pair of riders for the night of August twenty-first."

Baldwin saw the cavalryman pull in a deep breath and hold it. The Mexican's eyes flickered over to the girl who was staring at Baldwin, her cheeks wet.

"Twenty-first," Baldwin muttered. "I was bringing down a herd of hot-bloods I've got corralled here in town—"

Suddenly Baldwin's eyes lightened up. He leveled a finger at Bob Pryor.

"Sure I remember! Mount Whitney! You're the rider who pointed out the highest mountain in the U. S. to me, that night at the Lone Pine water hole. And I told you and your Mexican amigo how come I got my nickname of Lucky!"

CHAPTER V

Senator Stewart

WITH vast relief, the Rio Kid exhaled his pent-up breath. He turned to face Wavie Penprose. Impulsively she stood up and came toward him, hands eargerly outstretched.

"Mr. Baldwin has proved you were nowhere near Panamint Valley the night Dad was shot!" she burst out. "Oh, Captain Pryor, forgive me! Please forgive me!"

The Rio Kid took her in his arms, holding her close. His own eyes were suspiciously moist as he reached out to grasp Elias J. Baldwin's extended hand.

"Thank God you took your time hazing those horses to San Bernardino, sir," he breathed fervently. "That night at the foot of Mount Whitney, I—I did not even know your name. And now you've literally taken a noose off my neck!"

Baldwin's booming laugh relieved the tension.

"I tell you I'm the luckiest critter on two legs," the millionaire Comstocker laughed. "We'll drink to my luck rubbing off on other folks as well as it did on you tonight, Captain."

When they had for a time enjoyed Lucky Baldwin's hospitality, the visitors left. The Rio Kid and Wavie Penprose strolling down the starlighted street toward Doc Stiles' place, where the girl was still making her home. Celestino went back to the courthouse with the sheriff, to pick up their confiscated firearms, and to have a look at his black stallion and Saber, the Rio Kid's cavalry pony, in the county stables. Later in the sheriff's office, they would all meet to attend to the written formalities of the prisoner's release.

"Wavie," Pryor said gently as the two walked on alone, "was that silver of your father's that was stolen all you had in the world?"

The girl said in a steady voice, "I am not entirely alone, Captain. I am engaged to marry a young man who is working our claim back at Panamint City—August Stubblefield. I have already dispatched a letter to him by the new Panamint Pony Express, telling him about—Daddy. I'm hoping, by return mail, to hear from him asking me to come back—"

The Rio Kid felt an irritating sense of disappointment on learning that this lovely girl was betrothed to another man. For during the brief moment in Baldwin's suite, when he had held her trembling body in his arms, all the

pent-up longings for love and romance which his Spartan way of life denied him had surfaced in Bob Pryor.

In the years since Appomattox, especially since he had met Celestino Mireles, the Rio Kid had found adventure from Border to Border and from the Pacific to the Pecos. The dangers of his self-imposed crusade, helping the downtrodden and oppressed wherever he found them, had precluded his falling in love. Yet he knew, that if Wavie Penprose had been free, his heart could well have been hers.

"I hope you don't go back," he said gently, giving her no inkling of his tempestuous emotions. "Panamint City is too wild."

The girl nodded bleakly. "I know it is. I only hope Gus will sell the claim and leave before he is killed by some claim-jumper. They've tried to import a marshal up there to keep law and order, but no man in his right mind would accept such a job. You have perhaps heard of the Pirates?"

"The Pirates of Panamint," the Rio Kid murmured. "Indeed I have. A band of hoodlums, organized secretly to prey on honest miners. Why don't they organize Vigilantes to fight them, I wonder? Like they did in California and Montana and Idaho?"

"Perhaps," Wavie said, "Panamint City is too young, too new."

They had reached Doc Stiles' doorway now. Overhead, lamplight spilled fanwise from windows in the second floor, where San Berdoo's overworked medico and his wife had their living quarters. They had taken Wavie in as if she had been their own daughter.

Wavie opened the door leading to the staircase. Then she turned back to the Rio Kid, who stood with a wistful grin on his lips, his cavalry hat in hand. This would be their parting, their first and last good-by. Her voice trembled and her eyes were still wet with tears.

"Captain Pryor, I can't tell you how bitterly sorry I am that I accused you, and—"

THE Rio Kid silenced her with a gesture.

"Don't think about it, Wavie. Everything turned out *bueno*. But I hate to leave California with your father's murderers unpunished. Suppose you saw the real killers again—could you positively identify them?"

She shook her head. "No. It was dark. I could only see their clothes, really. And I was so terribly afraid." She paused. "But I have one clue."

"Yes?"

"I think they came from Panamint City. I think they must have trailed us out of Surprise Canyon, knowing we carried bullion. And I know there are many Mexicans and ex-soldiers in the camp."

"Do you have any idea what you will do next? Will you send for your fiance?"

She shrugged. "He'll come to me, when he knows what happened. I would go to him—if I could."

The Rio Kid took a deep breath.

"Celestino and I will be leaving for Mexico early tomorrow," he said. "This is *adios*. I wish you—and Stubblefield—a long and fruitful life, Wavie." They shook hands impersonally then. "Good night, Wavie, and lots of luck."

Celestino and the sheriff were waiting for Pryor at the jail which the trail partners had left, as prisoners, a short two hours ago. Now, thanks to Lucky Baldwin's intercession, the Rio Kid found himself accepting his twin shell belts and holstered guns from Searles.

"I been rough on you boys," the sheriff apologized. "Suppose we go over to the Index and hoist a few. Night marshal's taken over for the night. Reckon I'll be telling my grand-children about the Rio Kid and his partner, some day."

The Index proved to be the town's most ornate deadfall, patronized by a higher class of trade than the average saloon. As they found places at the bar, Sheriff Searles pointed out an imperious-looking man with a leonine buff beard, and wearing a top hat. He was

conversing with an equally important-looking citizen.

"That there is Senator Bill Stewart of Nevada," the sheriff whispered proudly. "Him and another millionaire politician, feller named J. P. Jones, are back of the Panamint City silver boom. Stewart's in town trying to argue Wells-Fargo into hauling out his silver. Heard they turned him down cold. The camp's too tough to handle."

The Rio Kid stared at Senator Stewart. Many times he had heard his friend, President U. S. Grant, speak of this Nevada legislator. Seeing him in person, it was easy to realize that Stewart had been author of the Fifteenth Amendment to the Constitution, allowing Negroes to vote.

"Understand Stewart is offering a thousand dollars a month to any man qualified to go up to Panamint City and clean it up as town marshal," the sheriff was saying. "Be tempted to resign my star and take on the job, myself, only—"

"Only what, Sheriff?" the Rio Kid inquired politely.

Searles chuckled. "Ramrod a silver camp where them Panamint Pirates are on the prowl? I want to grow up with California, son."

A bartender moved up to take their orders. But the Rio Kid had suddenly lost interest in Sheriff Searles' company. What he had heard about Stewart's role in the destiny of Panamint City had inflamed his imagination.

"Excuse me a minute, Sheriff," Pryor said absently. "I want a word with this Senator. Who's he talking with?"

"Mayor of San Berdoo," Searles said. "But don't get huffy if Stewart won't shake hands. He's a big wheel."

Jaw clamping, the Rio Kid shouldered his way through the press of the saloon crowd until he reached a spot alongside Senator Stewart's elbow. The great man was toying with his whisky glass as he reminisced with the San Bernardino mayor.

[*Turn page*]

Round-Up Pete Sez:

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"No sir," Stewart was saying, "you wouldn't have taken this Clemens hombre for an author, to look at him. Sloppy dresser, lazy as hell. Buttonholed me in Washington last session of Congress, said he'd mined in California and Nevada. Wanted me to grubstake him so he could write a book. Aims to call it *Innocents Abroad.* Well sir, Mayor he talked me into it. He could talk the brass off a bald monkey. Uses the pen name of Mark Twain. Missourian. He'll make his name world-known, too. Comical cuss. I—"

SENATOR WILLIAM Morris Stewart broke off as he felt a hand touch his shoulder.

"Pardon me, Senator," the Rio Kid said in a low voice. "My name is Pryor—friend of President Grant's. I understand you're looking for a temporary marshal to tame Panamint City."

Stewart blinked. "I am indeed."

"I think I'm the man you're looking for," the Rio Kid said. "Moreover, I have personal reasons for wanting to tackle the Panamint Pirates."

Senator Stewart promptly turned his back on the disgruntled Mayor of San Bernardino. His shot glass made interlocking wet circles on the mahogany bar top as he gave this handsome, military-appearing stranger his close scrutiny.

"Captain Pryor," Stewart said finally, 'are you intoxicated?"

The Rio Kid grinned. "Never more sober in my life. How about you, Senator?"

Stewart threw back his leonine head and laughed uproariously.

"*Touche,* Captain. Uh—you *are* a captain?"

"Inactive status, yes."

"And a friend of Grant's."

The Rio Kid nodded.

Stewart scowled. "I had not expected to recruit a marshal for Panamint City in a saloon, Captain Pryor."

The Rio Kid asked, "But it was a bona fide offer, Senator? I mean, you are looking for a star toter at your camp?"

Stewart nodded, waving off a bartender who had started to refill his glass.

"Absolutely, Captain. I'd invite you to drink, but if you and I are to discuss such an important proposition to us both, we need clear heads."

The Rio Kid shrugged. "I am not a drinking man anyway, sir."

"Do you have the time," Stewart asked, "to pow-wow about this matter?"

"Yes. I have a pardner who would be with me on the deal. A young vaquero from the Rio Grande country. Where can we discuss this matter?"

Stewart hauled a turnip watch from his Marseilles vest.

"Too many interruptions at my hotel. I suggest one of the private gaming rooms upstairs."

The Rio Kid nodded, fighting lights kindling in his eyes.

"*Bueno.* I will get my pardner, Celestino Mireles, and be right with you, Senator."

Returning to where his Mexican *compadre* and Sheriff Searles were waiting impatiently for a bartender to give them service, the Rio Kid said brusquely, "You and I have business with Senator Stewart, 'Tino. Will you excuse us, Sheriff?"

Searles' jaw dropped open in utter amazement when, a moment later, he saw Senator Bill Stewart vanish through a doorway leading to the Index gambling rooms upstairs, his arm linked through those of the Rio Kid and Celestino Mireles.

In the privacy of a poorly ventilated cubicle furnished with a baize-covered poker table and six Douglas chairs held together with wire braces, Senator Stewart surveyed his new acquaintances with a studied gravity.

"Being marshal of Panamint City," he warned, "is a suicidal undertaking, young men. The fact that Wells-Fargo refuses to run their stages to the camp is proof of that."

Celestino Mireles turned to stare at his partner.

"Marshal of Panamint City," he echoed. "Have you gone loco, General? I thought we were leaving for Mexico *mañana.*"

Pryor grinned bleakly. "Ten minutes ago, I had the same thought, *compañero,*" he replied. "But I can't get Wavie Penprose out of my mind. Somewhere in Panamint City are a pair of killers who are probably living high on the proceeds of the silver bars they murdered Tom Penprose to get. A raw deal like that sticks in my craw."

Senator Stewart said wonderingly, "How's that? Did I understand you to say old Tom Penprose is dead?"

THE Rio Kid nodded, and explained briefly the circumstances following, leading up to their release as a result of Lucky Baldwin's intervention in their behalf tonight.

"I take it you knew Penprose, sir?" Pryor wound up.

The Senator from Nevada nodded somberly. He was obviously profoundly shocked by the news of Penprose's death.

"Only slightly, but I knew him, and I certainly recall Miss Penprose. She was the only woman in Panamint who didn't live in a crib on Maiden Lane, as the miners call the red-light district in Surprise Valley."

The Rio Kid said, "Then perhaps you know her intended husband, Gus Stubblefield? He is working Tom's claim up there."

Stewart fingered his buff-colored beard thoughtfully.

"Stubblefield—Stubblefield. Can't say as I know him. But after all, there are close onto two thousand jack-leg muckers up in Surprise Valley. Penprose I knew because he brought his ore to my mill. My furnaces smelted out his bullion for him."

"And I might add, knowing Penprose, I liked him. I'd be mighty interested in seeing his murderers brought to justice."

CHAPTER VI

Suicide Contract

IN THE short silence that fell over the room, Senator Stewart was deeply thoughtful.

Then abruptly he said in a business-like voice, "If you take over the marshal's job at Panamint City then, Captain Pryor, your personal interest will be in running down Penprose's murderers? What do you have to go on?"

Pryor shrugged. "Not much. Wavie tells me she couldn't single out the soldier and the Mexican involved, even if she saw them again. But as I understand it, a marshal's main business would be to break up the Pirates gang operating there."

Stewart chuckled without humor. "The Pirates of Panamint. Don't get the idea the camp is completely lawless, Captain. The bulk of the miners, such as those working the Wyoming and Hemlock diggings, and my crew at the Big Mill, are honest, hard-working citizens. But we have our riffraff, our killers, and our tinhorns. And they are definitely banded together under a leader."

The Rio Kid tugged his lower lip reflectively.

"Something like the Innocents gang in Montana? The hoodlums who preyed on miners under the leadership of Sheriff Plummer?"

"Exactly," Stewart agreed. "Except that we have no lawman in Panamint, crooked or otherwise."

The Rio Kid got to his feet and took a turn around the room. They had come to no definite agreement, but he knew that Stewart had accepted his offer to take over the job of bringing law and order to the silver camp.

"I wouldn't want to wear a star in public, at first," he said. "That would be like wearing a bull's-eye on a shooting gallery. But with Celestino siding me, both working incognito as if we are just another pair of silver-hunters, we can circulate around the camp."

Celestino gave a mock shudder.

"Ai-i-i," he muttered. "And to theenk we were on our way to a long siesta een Mexico, General."

Ignoring the comment, the Rio Kid continued, "Sooner or later—perhaps posing as outlaws ourselves—we would be approached by one of your Pirates. Sooner or later we'd find a squealer, exactly as was the case in Alder Gulch when Plummer's band was finally exposed. In due time, Senator Stewart, I will present you with a bona fide roster of every criminal in Panamint who operates in this Pirate outfit."

Stewart's brown eyes snapped. "I will tell you something, Captain," he said grinning. "I have deduced that you are the far-famed Rio Kid. Am I right?"

"That is correct, sir."

"Then you are the man of action I have often heard General U. S. Grant speak of in Washington. Captain Pryor, let us consider that you are the marshal of Panamint City from the moment of your arrival there, with the full resources of Senator Jones and myself behind you."

"Thank you, Senator."

"And we'll forget the thousand-dollar monthly stipend I so foolishly jabbered about around town. Clean up that camp for me, and I promise you a substantial block of stock in the best mine we own up there. Survive this thing, and your fortunes are made. But make a wrong step, and you'll wind up in Sourdough Canyon."

"Sourdough Canyon?" Celestino echoed.

"That's the name of our boot hill cemetery. So far it contains the graves of over forty men. Most of them died with their boots on."

The Rio Kid reached out to shake Stewart's hand to seal the deal.

"And now," Stewart went on, "how soon will you be leaving for the Panamint diggings, Captain?"

PRYOR glanced at Celestino, reading the ravages of their five days and nights spent in the foul-smelling San Bernardino jail in the young Mexican's haggard countenance. He himself was far from the pink of physical condition, as a result of having lost so much sleep.

"As I told you, Senator," he commented, "I'd like to arrive there incognito. It is imperative that no one outside of yourself—and Senator Jones, of course, —know my mission in Surprise Valley. We will make ourselves known to Gus Stubblefield, of course, since I am directly concerned with running down the murderer's of Wavie Penprose's father."

Stewart's big, work-roughened fingers drummed the green baize of the poker table for a moment.

"I have a suggestion," he said. "Supplies for my mill are freighted to Panamint City through a San Bernardino contractor, Meyerstein by name. This is Wednesday. Every Monday, a Meyerstein and Company freight-wagon train leaves for the diggings. You and Celestino here could sign on as swampers. That way, even if one of Panamint Freight's muleskinners was a secret member of the Pirates, you two wouldn't be suspected."

For the first time since this interview had begun, a smile broke the fatigue lines on the Rio Kid's face.

"We leave for Panamint City with next Monday's freight wagons, then. You will be in the town eventually in case I have something to report?"

The Senator nodded. "Jones and I will be around the diggings until the first snow flies in November, unless a call from Washington takes us East."

The Rio Kid chuckled. "*Bueno.* I hope our mission will be completed and your silver bullion will be moving out of the Panamints before November, sir."

ELIAS J. "LUCKY" BALDWIN

ELIAS JACKSON BALDWIN, a farm boy born April 3, 1828, in Hamilton, Ohio, headed West in 1853 with a wagon train of immigrants, taking with him a herd of horses. After several narrow escapes from Indians he got his horses safely to San Francisco where he sold them for $1,000. With this money he bought a hotel, but shortly sold it at a large profit, the start of his amazing gift for amassing wealth.

When the Comstock Lode in Nevada was at the height of its boom, Baldwin went to Virginia City with a wagonload of lumber to sell. There he met Senator Bill Stewart and a young newspaperman, Sam Clemens, later the world-famous Mark Twain.

Accepting some supposedly worthless stock in payment for a debt, Baldwin forgot about it and went off to India on a big-game hunting trip—to find on his return that the stock—part of the Big Bonanza strike—was worth three million dollars. He had well-earned the nickname of "Lucky" tacitly bestowed upon him.

Baldwin, one of the great figures of his time, became president of the Pacific Stock Exchange, owner of the great Baldwin Hotel in San Francisco, and the first real-estate promoter of Southern California. The racing stable he founded, known as Rancho Santa Anita, is at present one of the world's most famous race tracks. In 1898, financial reverses overtook him, however, and he headed for the Alaska gold rush to start life anew at seventy-two. When he died in March, 1909, he was again a wealthy man.

The name of Lucky Baldwin has become a California legend.

Stewart responded to Pryor's smile. "It's like General Grant said, son. The Rio Kid gets what he goes after—pronto . . . . ."

The Rio Kid and Celestino Mireles, leading their saddle horses, reported at Meyerstein & Company's wagon yard in the cold gray light preceding the dawn on Monday morning.

Two twenty-mule jerkline teams were being hitched to the tandem-coupled freight wagons which comprised this week's Panamint-bound shipment, most of it lumber and roofing paper. These were the same wagons which had hauled the huge engine and boiler for Stewart

& Jones thirty-stamp mill a few months before. They were part of a fleet which was handling three hundred tons of mixed freight per month for the silver camp.

Newt Nobles, wagon boss in charge of Meyerstein's freighting company, had always had trouble hiring swampers for his wagon crews; men responsible for greasing axles, rustling firewood and cooking the meals.

Because of that shortage of manpower, Nobles had cooperated gladly with Senator Stewart in hiring Bob Pryor and his Mexican *compadre* for swamper duty on the next Panamint run. Stewart had sworn Nobles to strict secrecy regarding the true mission of the two partners.

"You won't rouse any suspicion when you quit the wagons to stay in Panamint, Captain Pryor," Nobles had assured them. "Happens every time, more's the pity."

Newt Nobles was on hand this morning as Pryor and Celestino tossed their sacked saddles and warbags atop the lumber-laden freighters. The wagon boss called them over to where the two drivers were checking their loads.

"You'll take your orders from your drivers, men," Nobles said. "This here one is Hardrock Wilbur, and this other is Pedro Escobar. Boys, shake hands with Bob Pryor and Celestino Mireles. They'll swamp for you on this trip."

THE Rio Kid felt his pulses skip a beat as he got his first close look at the wagoners. Hardrock Wilbur was a brindle-whiskered man in his forties who wore a patched and faded army tunic and cavalry pants. Escobar's Mexican clothing was a soiled replica of the *charro* costume which Celestino wore.

"Pull out in twenty minutes," Hardrock Wilbur said sourly. "Hope you two can cook better'n the last swampers we had."

"Twenty minutes," the Rio Kid said. "Time for me to run a little errand downtown."

Celestino took the opportunity to leave the wagon yard with his partner. He knew that Pryor was headed for Dr. Stiles' place. They had not seen Wavie Penprose since the night of their release from jail, but the doctor had reported that she and Mrs. Stiles had gone to the nearby settlement of Colton where the girl could recuperate under pleasanter surroundings than the stuffy office.

"Those drivers, General," Celestino panted. "They feet the descreeption of Tom Penprose's keelers, *no es verdad?*"

The Rio Kid grinned. "Got *me* excited for a minute. But they work for Meyerstein, driving wagons, 'Tino. They couldn't have trailed the Penproses with twenty-mule teams. But its more proof that maybe a lot of Panaminters wear the kind of clothes you and I do."

Disappointment needled the Rio Kid when he found the door of Doc Stiles' office locked and a sign up saying he had been called out of town on an emergency. Pryor had hoped to carry a message from the girl to her fiance, Gus Stubblefield, in Panamint City.

Celestino's dark eyes flickered tauntingly as they hurried back to the waiting wagons at Meyerstein's yard.

"I theenk, General, you are weeshing the Señorita Penprose was not going to marry thees Stubblefield, no?"

The Rio Kid grunted noncommittally. Celestino had put something into words that Pryor would not admit even to himself. But it was true—if Wavie had not been engaged to another man, Bob Pryor knew that by now he would have been in love for the first time in his adventure-packed career. The only reason he was not, was because he had sternly denied himself.

The sun was twenty minutes high over the brown pile of San Gorgonio peak when Hardrock Wilbur's mule team swung out of the wagon yard, and the heavily-loaded lumber wagons headed out on the first leg of their northward journey.

Noon found them scaling the long grades of the Cajon, a pass which was not really a pass at all but a gap between two mountain ranges, the San Garbriels on the west and the San Bernardinos on the east. By nightfall the plodding wagons had reached Heber Hunnington's pioneer station on the first crossing of the dry Mojave River. The Rio Kid and Celestino were relieved to find home-cooked meals awaiting them there, saving them the chore of whipping up food for Wilbur and Pedro and themselves.

The next day saw the wagons over the pass and on the edge of the Mojave. At noon a mail rider passed them at top speed—the "Panamint Express" which made it from San Bernardino to Surprise Valley between the rising and setting of the sun, thanks to strategically spaced relay stations.

The Rio Kid and Celestino won the grudging respect of their mulewhacker companions at the grub halts, since both were adept in the art of camp cookery.

By the third day they had passed Black's Ranch, on the pony mail route, and were heading northward up a dry wash, steering for the purple landmark on the northern horizon known as Pilot Knob, the first water available in a run of a day and a half.

It was grueling labor, fighting these heavy vehicles through the sand and sagebrush, despite the fact that Senators Stewart and Jones had, a year before, spent a fortune hiring Chinese workmen to clear a usable roadway toward the Panamints. Mule bells made their ceaseless melodic jangle; the long bullwhips in the expert hands of Hardrock Wilbur and the Mexican driver snapped like pistols when the mules had hard going in the salty marshes.

BY THE time they had reached Pilot Knob and were following the historic Borax Road northeastward toward Death Valley, the Rio Kid's skill as a cook had established him in the good graces of the surly Wilbur. In fact, the mulewhacker was moved to make a comparison between Pryor and the previous swamper.

"This here cookee would serve up chuckwalla and even buzzard sometimes, and try and tell me it was mock turtle," the teamster complained. "What he did, you see, was sell the company grub to jackleg muckers before we left Panamint, running us short of rations. Why, his cooking was so bad, I seen a coyote take one bite off'n his garbage pile, then run off and bury his teeth. Yes sir, Pryor, I'm hoping you'll work my wagons all winter."

Pryor made no comment. But nothing the man said or did escaped him. From the first, he had reason to suspect that Hardrock Wilbur was not a freighter by choice. The fellow had the furtive mannerisms of a man on the dodge, an outlaw who sought the anonymity of this desert trade route to avoid running afoul of California justice.

CHAPTER VII

Desert Meeting

ON THEIR sixth day out of San Bernardino, with the purple Panamint range looming in view to the northward, the wagons entered the sun-baked gap between the Slates and the western wall of Death Valley.

They were nearing the northern boundary of San Bernardino County now. As the Rio Kid scanned the desolation round about from his perch on the lead wagon, he realized that somewhere in this vicinity was where Wavie Penprose's father had met his death.

The wagons were crawling northward toward the mouth of Panamint Valley, only two days away from Sur-

prise Canyon and the end of the run, when they were overtaken by a red and yellow Concord stagecoach. As the jehu exchanged waves with old Wilbur and rolled northward behind a boil of alkali dust, the Rio Kid shouted above the rumble of wheels and the jangle of mule bells:

"I thought Wells-Fargo wasn't running stages into this country?"

Wilbur hipped around on his nigh wheeler and spat tobacco juice at the doubletrees.

"Ain't Wells-Fargo. That yonder's an independent outfit operating between San Berdoo and the diggin's. They're damn careful not to haul any silver out. Save theirselves getting jumped by the Panamint Pirates thataway."

On this journey, Pedro and Wilbur had taken turns driving in the lead, to avoid eating each other's dust on alternate days. This afternoon, Wilbur's string was in the forefront. As a result, the Rio Kid's lofty perch enabled him to see over the thick dust kicked up by the jerkline string.

It came as a surprise, then, when Wilbur's wagons rounded a sandy hummock and came upon the Panamint stagecoach, halted in an area without a trace of greenery to indicate a water stop. According to what Wilbur had said at breakfast this morning, the next water hole was at Postoffice Springs, near the mouth of Surprise Canyon. What, then, accounted for this halt?

As the freight wagons halted behind the road-blocking coach, Wilbur called out to the grizzled jehu on the box, "Trouble, Lloyd?"

The stage tooler shook his head. "Got a lady aboard. Begged and pleaded for me to stop here a few minutes. Seems her pa was bushwhacked over in them dunes a month ago and she wants to visit his grave."

Hardrock Wilbur spat an amber jet of tobacco into the sand. "She's holding up traffic, damn it."

Stage driver Lloyd grunted, "Your mules need a rest. This gal was a looker. Got aboard at San Berdoo, heading for Panamint City. No sporting woman, neither. Not one of Marthy Camp's jessie-belles. I don't do favors for them kind. This gal you do favors for."

The Rio Kid's heart slammed his ribs. He stared off across the undulating dunes to westward, tracing the diminutive footprints through the sparse Joshua trees and salt brush.

"This lady!" Pryor shouted to the stage driver. "You happen to know her name?"

Laughter came from the stage passengers who had alighted to stretch their cramped muscles. One of them, a gaunt man wearing the reversed collar and black coat of a frontier minister, cleared his throat and answered Pryor.

"You're too late, stranger. Her name is Miss Penprose, and she's heading for Panamint to get married. I am the Reverend Orne of Owens Valley. I will perform the nuptials."

Bob Pryor did not observe the frozen expression that twisted Hardrock Wilbur's face at this news. He was too busy climbing off the lumber wagon. As he jumped to the ground, Wilbur said tartly:

"Where you going, Pryor? Git back aboard!"

The Rio Kid answered brusquely, "I've got to check on that girl, Hardrock. She's a friend of mine. She's got no business heading for Panamint, wedding or no wedding."

AS THE Rio Kid headed off across the dunes, Wilbur called angrily, "You'll have to catch up afoot, son! I got no time for stalling around like Zeke's stage is doing."

Pryor did not look back. From the halted wagon in the rear, Celestino Mireles was staring after him, puzzlement written on his sombrero-shaded features. What possessed the Rio Kid to go gallivanting off into the desert afoot in this blistering heat?

A scant two hundred yards off the wagon road, the Rio Kid topped a sandy

rise and looked down into a swale where a clump of mesquites showed dull gray-green against the heat-shimmer of the sands.

Down there at the foot of the sandy slope, Wavie Penprose was kneeling as if in prayer alongside a wind-scoured oblong mound of sand and rocks. Off to one side, the Rio Kid saw the sun gleaming whitely on the bones of four animals, picked clean by the ravening beaks and claws of desert *zopilotes*, scoured by the fangs of scavenging coyotes and jackals. Mule and burro skeletons.

This was where Tom Penprose had met his death and Wavie was keeping a tryst at her father's lonely grave. Not a half mile to the northward was the conical cairn of lava rocks marking the Inyo County border. This *was* Lige Searles's territory, then.

Wavie looked up as the Rio Kid's shadow fell across her father's grave. She jumped to her feet, recognition quickly erasing the first stab of terror which had flashed into her eyes.

"Captain Pryor!" she cried eagerly. "You gave me a start. I was afraid Mr. Lloyd—the driver—had become impatient at my staying here so long—"

Pryor took the girl's hand in his own. She was again in masculine garb—stetson, hickory shirt, levis and boots, all grimed with the soda and grit of the desert journey.

"Wavie, you don't belong here," the Rio Kid said earnestly. "Surely Gus Stubblefield didn't send for you."

She lowered her eyes contritely. "No. In his letter he begged me to promise to stay in San Bernardino. But I couldn't endure it, Captain. Please try to understand! I had to sneak away fom Dr. and Mrs. Stiles to catch the stage. I've been so afraid something would happen to Gus!"

"I know," Pryor said. "Anyway, I hope I can persuade your husband to take you and leave Panamint City forever as soon as possible after your marriage. I'm sure Gus will agree with me."

He was leading Wavie away from her father's grave now, knowing the terrific heat of mid-afternoon could be dangerous to a girl so recently a near-victim of sunstroke.

"You mean *you* are going to Panamint City, Captain?" she asked, when they paused at the crest of the dune, both of them short of breath from such a short climb.

"I am. I tried to tell you before I left San Bernardino, but—"

Tersely he told her about the contract he had made with Senator Stewart to bring law and order to Panamint City, and her own part in bringing him to that decision.

"Your stage-coach will beat our wagons to Surprise Valley by a day's margin," he wound up. "I hope you'll be on your way out before I get there. But if you see me, don't recognize me. The men who killed your father—if they *are* in Panamint City—will be surprised to see you step off that stage. They assumed you'd die in the desert, after they'd killed your mounts and stolen your boots. At any rate, it would be disastrous if they knew you and I were acquainted."

Wavie nodded mutely as they resumed their plodding journey back to the stage trail.

"As a matter of fact," the Rio Kid went on anxiously, "they will mark you for death if they discover you are still alive. Make sure Stubblefield understands that, so he can guard you."

THEY were within earshot of the waiting stage now. Hardrock Wilbur had not carried out his threat to resume the wagon journey without Bob Pryor. The muleskinner had gone back to talk to Pedro Escobar. Celestino Mireles, taking advantage of this halt, was out on the roadside gathering campfire fuel to stow in the cooney-sack under his wagon, for tonight's supper fire.

Pryor waited until he had seen Wavie and the other stage passengers aboard, and the Concord had pulled out in a boil

of dust. When he walked back to the freight wagons, Pedro Escobar was standing in the shade there, rolling a black-paper *cigarillo.*

"So you know Señorita Penprose?" the Mexican said unctuously. "For a stranger, señor, you get acquainted *muy rapido.*"

Something in Pedro's poker-faced expression struck a prescience of disaster in the Rio Kid.

"You know her, too, Pedro?"

Pedro fired his cigarette. Then, without warning, he snapped a long-barreled Colt .44 from holster and leveled it at Bob Pryor's belt buckle.

"I knew her *padre,* too, Señor Pryor," Pedro Escobar whispered. "Een fact, I saw the *viejo* die. My partner shot heem."

Beads of cold moisture congealed on the Rio Kid's cheeks. He could see Escobar's brown knuckle whitening under the pressure of his finger on the trigger.

"Then — Hardrock was Penprose's killer!"

The Mexican's head bobbed. "Señor Wilbur deed some theenking while you were out walking weeth the señorita," Escobar said. "He theenks you and Celestino were the men we heard about een San Bernardino—the hombres who were put een jail for keeling old Tomaso. Wilbur theenks that ees why you are going to Panamint Ceety—to try and find Tomaso's keelers. No?"

Blood was hammering in the Rio Kid's head. The wagon kept him from seeing past this Mexican gunhawk, to see where Hardrock Wilbur was at this moment. The mulewhacker had tarried behind, undoubtedly, to throw his gun on Celestino.

"The heat's got you, Pedro," the Rio Kid said in a desperate effort to stall for time. "You're talking loco."

Escobar shook his head. His eyes ranged on past his target to where the Panamint City stage, bearing Wavie Penprose, was now more than a mile distant. Out of range of a gunshot's report!

"You teeped your hand, Señor Pryor," Pedro Escobar went on in his steady whisper, "when you got off the wagon to pay a veesit to Señorita Penprose and her *padre's* grave. Now Wilbur and I, we have two more graves to deeg."

The gunshot, when it came, exploded with a violence which was like a sharp spike being driven into the Rio Kid's eardrums. His body tensed, reacting automatically to the expected shock of hot lead drilling his chest.

Then, as if by a miracle, he saw Pedro Escobar's hand go limp on his Colt handle. No smoke wisped from the bore of that Colt. Its hammer was still at full cock.

Staring like a man in a trance, the Rio Kid saw the Mexican killer's knees unhinge. Blood was gouting from a bullet-hole in Pedro's left temple, leaking down to stain his serape.

Slowly, like a hewn tree toppling, Escobar fell backward at the feet of Hardrock's saddled wheel horse.

By elapsed time, less than two clock ticks had been measured since Escobar had given the Rio Kid his death sentence. Now the Rio Kid's hands whipped to his own gunstocks and he spun around to face in the direction from which that gunshot had come.

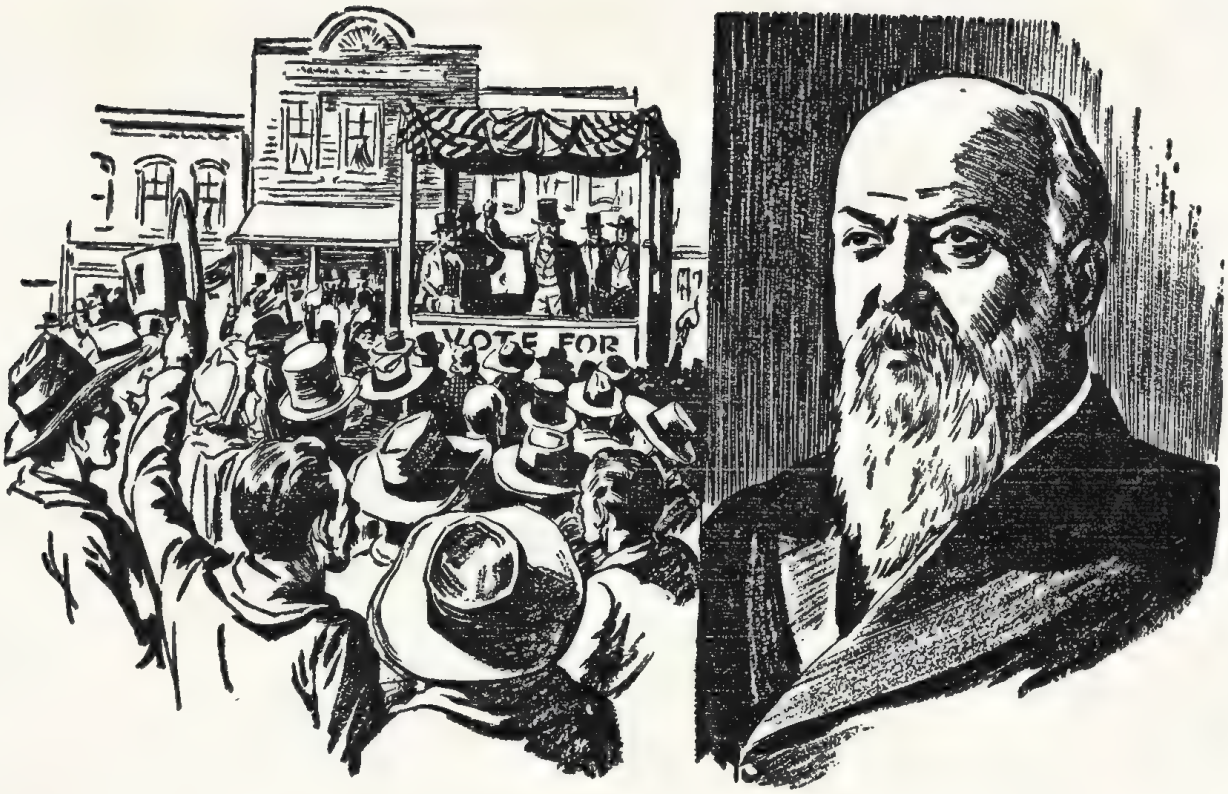
CELESTINO MIRELES was stalking in from the dunes, a smoke-spewing Colt in hand. Fifty yards back along his tracks was the double armload of mesquite faggots which Celestino had been busy gathering for cooking purposes at their next camp.

"Eet was either you or heem, General," the *hidalgo* said hoarsely, coming up. "I see Pedro throw a gun on you. *Porque?*"

Reaction put its throb in the pit of Bob Pryor's stomach. He glanced once at Pedro's corpse, sprawled limply on the sand, then wheeled to face the Mexican's wagon, further down the road.

"Wilbur—it was Hardrock Wilbur who murdered Tom Penprose!"

The Rio Kid broke into a run, heading



JOHN PERCIVAL JONES

LAST, and longest-lived, of the far-famed "Bonanza Kings" of the Comstock Lode, "J.P." was not a Westerner by birth, nor even an American. He was born in 1830 in Herefordshire, England, and brought to Ohio as an infant.

The rapidly spreading story of gold in California sent young Jones around the Horn in '49, little knowing that his ship passed another craft on which was a man destined to become a fellow Senator and empire-builder, Bill Stewart.

Reaching the Mother Lode, Jones quickly became a mining operator. He served as deputy sheriff and later as sheriff of Tuolumne County, and in 1863 became a member of the State Senate. When the famous Comstock Lode at Virginia City was in the throes of a depression, Jones put it back on its feet by opening the Crown Point Mine. A disastrous fire broke out in the Crown Point diggings, and after Jones rescued trapped miners at great risk to his own life he became a popular hero with Nevada's mining population, and was elected to the U. S. Senate in 1873.

His personal fortune was estimated at $20,000,000 when he learned of the silver strike in Surprise Canyon, high in the Panamint Mountains. Bill Stewart joined him in investing there, where they had dreams of building another Comstock. But the Comstock Panic in 1877 wiped out Jones' fortune. He retired when nearing eighty, and in Santa Monica built "Miramar," later a fabulous resort hotel. Palisades Park, overlooking the seaside homes of movie greats, was a gift from J.P. Jones to his city. He died in Los Angeles in 1913.

toward the second string of wagons. Then, alongside Wilbur's caboose wagon, he skidded to a halt.

Wilbur was nowhere in sight, down there beside Escobar's wagons where Pryor had last seen the muleskinner checking harness. He might be drawing a bead on them at this instant!

"Back, 'Tino! He might drygulch us."

And then at a blur of motion off to one side Pryor and Celestino both stared off beyond the tail-gate of the wagon. Hardrock Wilbur, mounted on Celestino's coal-black stallion, was heading up a cactus-stippled ridge at full gallop.

Celestino's voice rose in an angry shout:

"That *ladrone* has stolen my pony, General!"

CHAPTER VIII

Mule Bells on the Way

MUTTERING an oath, the Rio Kid rounded the end of the wagon to get at the hackamore which tied his horse Saber, to the bull bar. Before he could mount, a bullet whistled inches over his head, and he saw a flash of sunlight on a rifle barrel as Hardrock Wilbur halted the black on the crest of the far ridge.

Another .30-30 slug *thunked* into the wooden planking of the tail-gate as the Rio Kid and Celestino jumped hastily for cover. Crouching behind the big wheels, they peered under the dun cavalry pony's belly and saw Hardrock Wilbur wheel Celestino's stolen mount and vanish over the skyline.

A groan escaped the Rio Kid. On the Mojave crossing they had had ample proof of Hardrock Wilbur's marksmanship with that Winchester he was carrying. They had seen him drop buzzards out of the sky with phenomenal accuracy.

The whole picture was clear in their minds now. Celestino owed his life to the fact that he had been out wood-gathering at the time that Hardrock Wilbur and Pedro Escobar had had their hurried pow-wow.

Wilbur must have known from the outset of their wagon journey that his two swampers would bear watching. Undoutedly both he and Escobar had read the *Guardian* story about how two men who surely resembled this pair, had been arrested in San Bernardino and subsequently released.

If so, the two renegades also had been aware of the fact that Wavie had not died on the desert. Perhaps the girl owed her life to the fact that the doctor's wife had taken her away from San Bernardino upon Wilbur's arrival there; otherwise she might have been murdered as a safety precaution by the slayer who had shot her father.

Today, when Hardrock Wilbur had heard the Rio Kid say that the Penprose girl was a friend of his, and had seen him hurrying off across the dunes to talk with the daughter of the prospector the muleskinner had murdered, Wilbur's first instinct had been to tell Escobar that the girl was a passenger on the stage-coach.

Escobar had been waiting at the wagons to throw a gun on the Rio Kid as soon as the stage left, while Wilbur had remained behind to take care of Celestino.

But Escobar's death had been a shock for Wilbur. On the spur of the moment he had mounted Celestino's handy saddle horse and chose getaway rather than a shoot-out.

"It would be foolhardy now to attempt running Wilbur down," Pryor said to Celestino heavily. "He could fort up and gun us out of saddle at a thousand yards' range, the way he handles a rifle."

Celestino, beside himself with anger at the loss of his horse, nodded glumly.

"Now he weel beat us to Panamint Ceety! Maybe he weel try to amboosh us before we reach Surpise Canyon. Eet ees *muy malo.*"

The Rio Kid came slowly to his feet. Wilbur's sudden flight left them in a serious predicament in more ways than one. It left them with the responsibility for getting the Meyerstein lumber cargo to its destination. And besides, it would be inhuman to desert forty mules here on the open desert.

Then another disturbing thought occurred to Pryor.

"We've got to realize that Hardrock may be one of the Pirates of Panamint. 'Tino. I'll lay odds he'll head for Pana-

mint City. And now, even if we do beat his drygulch trap, our arrival in the camp will not be a secret."

Celestino nodded heavily, his eyes still fixed on the heat-shimmering skyline where Wilbur had vanished aboard the Mexican's prize stallion. A smudge of dust on the sky in the direction of Windy Gap, the southern entrance to Death Valley, was proof that Wilbur was headed northward.

"Might as well hit the road," Pryor finally said wearily. "We'll leave Escobar for the coyotes. Gives me the shakes, Celestino, knowing we've been rubbing elbows with Tom Penprose's killer ever since we left San Bernardino."

Pausing only to drag Pedro's corpse to one side of the road—a thorough search of the outlaw's pockets revealed no information of value—the Rio Kid and Celestino mounted the saddled wheelers and got the heavy wagons under way.

THAT night, still fifteen miles short of the water hole at Postoffice Spring, they camped on the desert floor and took turns standing guard throughout the night, against the possibility that Wilbur would attempt an ambuscade.

Before dawn, they were on the road flanking the rugged Argus Range, seeing no sign of life until they met the out-bound Panamint Pony Express rider watering his horse at Postoffice. During the rider's brief halt at the water hole, the Rio Kid learned only one thing of value—the stage-coach's return trip, which would be taking Wavie Penprose out of the mountains, was not scheduled to leave Panamint City until early next week.

North of Postoffice Spring, the wagon ruts skirted the foot of the broad alluvial ramp sprawling at the toes of the Panamint Mountains due west of towering Telescope Peak.

Mid-morning found the two wagon outfits crawling laboriously up the alluvial fan into the narrow mouth of Surprise Canyon.

This western flank of the Panamints was utterly barren, not even cactus growing on its eroded rock scarps and gully walls. Once inside Surprise Canyon, the cliffs pinched in on either side of Senator Stewart's wagon road, at times so narrow that the hubs nearly scraped the basalt walls.

Twelve miles, uphill all the way, this canyon would open at the seven-thousand-foot level into Surprise Valley and the fabulous silver camp of Panamint City. Considering the load they were hauling, the Rio Kid knew it would be dark before they reached the mining town. That might, or might not, be to their advantage.

The tension which gripped the two men increased with each slow-won mile of the Surprise Canyon grade. Each twist and turn of the narrowing gulch presented its opportunity for a bushwhack trap, and both were certain that Hardrock Wilbur or one of his cohorts would be waiting for them.

The jangle of their mule bells telegraphed their approach to the driver of an out-bound string of ore wagons. They found the descending freighters pulled up in a wide spot in the dry canyon which had been gutted by some flash flood.

For the next torturous mile of grade, the Rio Kid and Celestino had to eat the motionless dust left by that outbound caravan. Overhead the sky narrowed to a blue string. The sun never touched the bottom of this portion of Surprise Canyon.

Halfway to Panamint City, sundown caught them in a wide spot between the cliffs. Travel would be impossible after dark, so they would have to drop trail here for the night.

They were blocking the braked wheels with rocks when a rattle of hoofs warned them of a rider's approach from up the grade. Prudently, the two took refuge behind their wagons as they saw a lone horseman round a sharp bend in the canyon, spot the wagons, and halt.

"Anybody around?" The rider sent his

call down-canyon.

The Rio Kid eared his gunhammer to full cock.

"Elevate," he shouted, "and ride in slow!"

The rider appeared startled. He was a husky young miner with a russet beard the same hue as his faded shirt. Lifting his arms hat-brim high, he spurred his grulla mare on into the opening.

Then, catching sight of the Rio Kid and Celestino, the rider called out softly, "*You* are Captain Pryor, then?"

Pryor nodded, keeping his gun on this stranger. He could be one of the notorious Panamint Pirates, sent down-canyon by Wilbur himself on a drygulch mission.

"I am Gus Stubblefield," the rider explained then. "Wavie said you were following her stage. I came down to guide you in."

Grins of relief touched the faces of the Rio Kid and Celestino as they holstered their guns and walked up when Stubblefield dismounted.

THEY shook hands with Wavie Penprose's fiancé, tacitly approving his friendly simplicity and quiet dignity. Gus Stubblefield was obviously far above the run-of-the-mill variety of mining camp denizens.

"You're working for Meyerstein?" Stubblefield asked curiously. "Where are your drivers?"

The Rio Kid said, "We ran into some trouble just after Wavie left us. Or is it Mrs. Stubblefield now?"

The young miner grinned shyly. "We aren't married yet. Wavie wanted you to be in on the wedding, knowing you would be showing up tomorrow." Then young Stubblefield's face went serious. "You say you had some trouble?"

Briefly, Bob Pryor explained the circumstances of Escobar's shooting and the escape on Celestino's black stallion of the man who had killed Tom Penprose.

"And to think I saw Wilbur in front of Neagle's saloon only this morning—Tom's killer!" Stubblefield ground out. "I saw that black stallion of yours, too, Mireles. Wilbur claimed he bought the mount in San Berdoo."

Celestino patted his gun butt. "When I lay eyes on heem," the young Mexican murmured, "I weel ask heem for hees beel of sale."

Stubblefield's face was grim in the gathering darkness.

"You'd better drop trail here," he advised the Rio Kid, "and come on up to camp with me—tonight. We'll send Meyerstein's hostlers down to bring up these wagons tomorrow. If Hardrock Wilbur knows you're coming, he'll be watching for these wagons to show up. And it wouldn't surprise me if he ain't one of the Pirate bunch, in which case the odds will be purty steep to buck."

The Rio Kid nodded somberly, in full agreement with Gus's suggestion.

"Saber will carry double," he observed. "He hasn't always, but he has learned to, when the necessity arises. We're grateful for your services as guide, Stubblefield. And let me congratulate you on your choice of a bride. Wavie Penprose is pure quill and twenty-four fine."

Stubblefield grinned embarrassedly in the gathering darkness.

"She's talked me into selling out Tom's claim and quitting Panamint City," he confessed. "But if you're the new marshal, Captain Pryor, you'll need a deputy who knows the ropes up there. Reckon I'll have to change my mind, for I'm your man."

Celestino and the Rio Kid clambered up on the wagons to get their belongings.

When they finally headed out, with Saber carrying double and Stubblefield taking the lead with a trail rope, the pit of Surprise Canyon was as black as a mine shaft.

Two hours' riding brought them to the end of Surprise Canyon and the beginning of Surprise Valley. Here the cliffs fell away at the seven-thousand-foot elevation, revealing the broad, brush-dotted slopes of Surprise Valley under the stars.

Close at hand, earth-bound stars

twinkled in the bottom of the valley—the lights of Panamint City's honky-tonks and barrooms. Towering over all, like a sentinel tower, was the high brick chimney of the Big Mill operated by Stewart & Jones, the rumble of its thirty stamps filling the valley with its incessant thunder, milling ore around the clock.

"Panamint City," Gus Stubblefield said succinctly, reining up alongside Saber. "Toughest camp this side of hell, and I'm not exaggerating. Two thousand men and fifty-sixty girls there, including the celebrated Madam Mustache herself."

They reined up, feeling the sinister impact of this mining camp perched high on the Panamint divide. Just over the rocky spires of the ridge boxing in Surprise Valley to the east, the mountains dropped off into the salt-paved abyss of Death Valley, deepest hole in the Western Hemisphere, where the desert fell as low as two hundred and eighty feet below the level of the sea.

ALL the bawdy sounds of the mining camp reached them over the trembling rumble of the stamp mill—the brassy laughter of the sporting women on Maiden Lane, the revelry of rough men in the adobe saloons and gambling dens.

"Out of two thousand population," the Rio Kid asked, "do you have any idea how many are on the roster of the Pirates gang?"

Stubblefield shrugged.

"Nobody knows. Some think they're just a handful of claim-jumpers and saloon riffraff. Senator Jones thinks the number is closer to ten per cent, or over two hundred. We got a saying that the only ones you can trust are the forty-odd hombres up in Sourdough Canyon yonder, weighted down by tombstones."

The Rio Kid felt an icy sensation prickle the hairs on the nape of his neck. Now that he had arrived in Panamint City, he was beginning to realize the full significance of his impulsive promise to Senator Stewart back in San Berdoo only ten days ago.

"Of course, you'll quit your marshal job," Stubblefield went on, "as soon as we corral Hardrock Wilbur. Wavie says your main reason for coming here was to track down her pa's killers."

The Rio Kid shook his head.

"I promised Senator Stewart I'd clean up the Pirates outfit and make it safe for him to ship his silver outside," he said gravely. "For the sake of the nine out of ten men up here who are honest, I've got to carry through with my marshal job. Nailing Wilbur is the least of my worries now."

CHAPTER IX

Silver, Scenery and Sin

SUNRISE spilled its golden flood over the pink granite crags overlooking the sequestered mining camp in Surprise Valley. The Rio Kid and Celestino Mireles were just emerging from a prospect hole a few yards above the solid rock house which Tom Penprose had built on his silver claim. Gus Stubblefield had spread his blankets inside the sheltered tunnel mouth with them, having turned the prospector's cabin over to his bride-to-be.

Daylight revealed Panamint City in all its malignant ugliness. Less than two years old, the camp boasted a log-walled brewery, a weekly newspaper edited by an itinerant printer and known as the *Panamint News*, a score or more of deadfalls and honkytonks, and a heterogeneous collection of other buildings, including a brick bank which had repeatedly been plundered by the Pirates gang.

Dominating the town, just to the south of the narrow entrance to the funneling

wagon way leading to Surprise Canyon, was Stewart & Jones stamp mill and its towering brick chimney, built by Chinese labor only this summer.

At this early hour, the camp was a scene of bustling confusion. Smoke billowed from the stack of the Big Mill, obscuring the snow-capped crown of Telescope Peak and the view of Panamint Valley and the further Argus Mountains to westward.

On a cableway half a mile long ore buckets were being trundled in an endless parade from the big Wyoming and Hemlock mines, the ore running close to a hundred dollars a ton in lead and silver. There was a heavy surf-roar of industrial sounds—the thundering of the stamps which pulverized ore twenty-four hours a day, the gurgle of the vast concentrating vats, the satanic hum of the furnaces. Freight outfits jammed the single street. Carpenters' hammers made a racket on one or more of the new buildings which went up every day.

"And in spite of all this activity," Gus Stubblefield told the Rio Kid, and chuckled wryly, "the biggest operators of all—Jones and Stewart—can't work out any way for them to get their bullion down the canyon. They know the Pirates would waylay their treasure wagons, sure as hell."

When Wavie was serving them breakfast in her father's cabin a little later, Gus made one last effort to persuade Bob Pryor to give up the idea of single-handedly taming the town's rough element. That way, he said, lay suicide; the odds were stupendous. The two Senators who were the leading citizens had influence in the Government; let them wheedle President Grant into dispatching a company of cavalry to escort the bullion wagons down Surprise Canyon. Surely it was no concern of the Rio Kid's.

"What I'm worried about isn't nearly as dramatic as the extermination of the Pirates," Wavie Penprose said frankly. "It's knowing that the man who murdered Dad is down in camp somewhere —waiting to shoot you on sight, Captain Pryor!"

He got up from the table. Her words had reminded him that his leisure time was over.

"Celestino and I will separate and begin our manhunt this morning," he said gravely. "We can spot Wilbur as quickly as he can spot us. That makes the odds two to one."

Stubblefield fingered his curly beard thoughtfully.

"Unless," he reminded, "Wilbur *is* a member of the Pirates, as I've heard hinted more than once. In that case any man you meet could be a potential killer, Pryor."

After checking the loads in his six-guns, the Rio Kid paid his respects to his hostess, promising to return to the Penprose claim overlooking Panamint City as soon as he heard the reduction mill's noon whistle.

At that time, the Reverend Orne would be on hand to unite Wavie and Gus in holy matrimony. Pryor and Celestino were to be the witnesses.

THE Rio Kid left the stone cabin first, saddling Saber and riding down the steep south face of Surprise Valley toward the bustling center of the camp. By now, Hardrock Wilbur would know that he and Celestino had abandoned the lumber wagon. In all probability Wilbur would be on the prowl, hunting the Rio Kid with the same tenacity with which Pryor was now embarking on his own manhunt.

There was a certain safety in the bustling throngs of muleskinners and prospectors, mill workers and tradesmen. A tangled tide of them flowed between Panamint City's double row of false-fronted shacks and canvas-roofed store buildings and the Rio Kid felt certain that even in a camp with a reputation as rough as this one, a sneaking renegade like Hardrock Wilbur would hardly dare gun a man from saddle in full view of such a milling crowd.

And then, in front of Yager's Dexter

Saloon, the Rio Kid caught sight of Celestino Mireles's magnificent black stallion tied to a hitch-rack!

The black could well be bait for a man-trap, he knew. Wilbur, who had stolen the horse, was well aware of the young Mexican's love for the animal, and Wilbur would also know that the two swampers he had deserted outside the Panamint foothills yesterday would surely turn up in this boom camp.

Ground-tying Saber in an alley between Neagle's Oriental Saloon and the bank building, the Rio Kid worked his way across the wagon-packed street and on through the ornately-carved batwing doors of the Dexter Saloon.

Even at this hour, the barroom was crowded. The Rio Kid's sweeping glance took in the throng of miners and freighters, the small knots of humanity gathered around the chuck-a-luck cage, the faro table, the roulette wheels, and the numerous poker games. This was the sort of deadfall Hardrock Wilbur would hang out in after his wagon trips from San Bernardino.

Daylight shining in through the rainbow-hued transoms above the double street doors revealed that this saloon could be considered elegant even in a city like Los Angeles or San Berdoo. Huge crystal chandeliers depended from the tin-plated, fourteen-foot ceiling. The walls were covered with satin-gilt paper, on which hung many costly oil paintings, mostly of nudes.

Cruising through the barroom crowd, the Rio Kid's alert gaze failed to spot Hardrock Wilbur's bearded face or towering figure. Perhaps, this soon after dawn, if the renegade did not know his former swampers were no longer with the wagons, he was in ambush somewhere near the mouth of Surprise Canyon, waiting for them to bring the Meyerstein wagons in.

An elbow brushed Pryor's with an urgency which caused the manhunter to wheel around, every nerve taut. To his surprise, he found himself standing alongside Senator Bill Stewart, who had arrived here by stage several days previously to look after his mining interests.

Stewart was not looking at Pryor, but his first words, spoken behind cupped hands as he lighted a Cuban cheroot, were intended for the Rio Kid's ears alone:

"Show up in half an hour at the mill office. Want you to meet Jones. You can pretend to be hunting work."

The Rio Kid made no sign that he had heard. He said through the haze of tobacco smoke, "Tom Penprose was shot by one of Newt Nobles's muleskinners, Senator. Hardrock Wilbur. I think he may be in this saloon."

Stewart's reaction was obscured by the heavy smoke screen he was puffing up.

"Wilbur? The devil you say! Haven't seen him around, and I've been here for an hour, trying to sober up one of my shafthouse superintendents. Watch your back, Captain."

STEWART wheeled and made his way out of the Dexter. A bewhiskered desert rat, spotting the Rio Kid as a new arrival in town who might possibly be good for a free drink, plucked Pryor's sleeve and gestured toward the long mahogany bar where three aprons were hard-pressed to serve their customers.

"See that blank space on the backbar yonder, stranger?" the barfly chuckled conversationally. "That's where the Big Mirror was. You ever hear about the big looking glass?"

The Rio Kid allowed himself to be steered to the bar. This vantage point was as good as any from which to size up the crowd.

"The Big Mirror?" he echoed, signaling a barkeeper to serve his companion but not himself." Afraid I haven't heard of it."

The barfly downed his drink with a quick snap of his head and sloshed himself another by way of a chaser.

"Wall, Fred Yager—he's the feller who owns this shebang—he decided to import the biggest pier-glass mirror in

California. Seven foot by twelve. Come around the Horn on a boat, and then started up from San Pedro on one of Nadeau's mudwagons. Ten mile a day, that looking glass crawled across the mountains and the potash flats. Boys made bets she wouldn't get here in one piece. Took two months to reach the bottom of Surprise Canyon. Another two weeks to inch her up the grade.

"Finally—" the narrator was hitting the bottle every time he paused for breath— "finally the Big Mirror was lugged in here and hung up behint the bar. Biggest looking glass in the West. That night, Yager threw a party to celebrate. That was a big mistake."

The barfly hiccuped. "One of the boys got over happy about seeing hisself in that glass, dragged out a gun, and shot at his reflection. You'll see the remains of the Big Mirror out in the back lot now. Wrecked to smithereens."

The Rio Kid paid the bartender and left the saloon, convinced that if Hardrock Wilbur had been in the Dexter he could not have escaped attention.

When the big frosted-glass doors closed behind the Rio Kid, the supposedly drunken story-teller made his way quickly to a door opening off the backbar. Seated at a table inside the private gambling room, Hardrock Wilbur was studying a solitaire lay-out.

"Senator Stewart spoke to the Rio Kid without knowing anybody seen it, Boss," the barfly reported. "Any orders? You want me to foller him?"

Wilbur shook his head. "Keep an eye on Celestino's black pony, Jenkins. That's the bait that'll spring our trap on the Mex."

Ten minutes later the Rio Kid was being ushered into Senator Stewart's private office at the big reduction mill. Standing beside a massive iron safe studying a dossier of business papers was a tall man in his middle forties, whose heavy whiskers were the brightest red Pryor had ever seen on a man.

"Captain Pryor," said Stewart, "meet my partner, J. P. Jones. I've already told him about you—and I know you've heard of him. The man who put the Comstock lode back on its feet, the hero of the Crown Point fire in Virginia City—and the man who aims to build a railroad from the Pacific Ocean to Panamint Valley to ship out our silver some day."

J. P. Jones and the Rio Kid solemnly shook hands.

"This is the first time," Pryor admitted facetiously, "I've shaken the hand of a man reputed to be worth twenty million."

Senator Jones grinned.

"Bill speaks of my prospective railroad," he grunted. "Even if I had a locomotive waiting at the foot of Surprise Canyon today, I'd be helpless to get our bullion down to the tracks. But Bill tells me you're going to tackle the hoodlums responsible for our embarrassing stalemate, Captain Pryor. I don't know whether to regard you as a saint or a fool. But if you deliver, I've got a block of our best mining stock waiting as your reward."

THE Rio Kid said bluntly, "I am not in the habit of risking my hide for money, Senator Jones. I am taking on this chore because I think it is high time that law and justice were established in this camp. My efforts are not for sale to anyone, and never will be."

If this was meant as a rebuff, Jones did not appear to resent it. He said gently, "Stewart tells me you have already located the killer of Tom Penprose. Fine man, Tom. Care to tell me the details?"

"Certainly," Pryor answered, and proceeded to explain the circumstances which had led up to his arrival in Panamint City the night before.

When he had finished, J. P. Jones waggled his head somberly.

"Wilbur shouldn't be too hard to apprehend—if he doesn't put a bullet in you first."

Jones came to his feet, removing a heavy brass key from his pocket.

"While you're here," he said, "maybe

you'd like to see a couple of million dollars worth of silver bullion in one heap, Captain. The honey that attracts the bees we call the Pirates here in Surprise Valley."

Stepping to an inner door, Jones unlocked it and beckoned Pryor.

CHAPTER X

Silver Cannon Balls

PEERING into the strong-room the opened door revealed, a room which was in reality an excavation blasted out of solid bedrock, the Rio Kid could not stifle a gasp of sheer astonishment.

From floor to ceiling, the grotto was piled with glittering bars of pure Panamint silver, ricked like cordwood. Never in his life had the Rio Kid imagined such a concentration of mineral wealth in one place.

"Here it is," Jones sighed heavily, "ready for shipment to the mint. The only way out is by way of Surprise Canyon—and God knows how many armed bandits are waiting to see the first wagon-load of this stuff leave the mill. A secret shipment is utterly impossible."

The Rio Kid scratched his jaw thoughtfully.

"An idea occurs to me," he said finally. "It's so simple I'm sure it must be unworkable. But it strikes me as a safe and obvious way to transport this metal out of the mountains without risk of theft."

The two Nevada politicians glanced at each other with thinly veiled amusement.

"If you've cooked up a scheme to ship this silver without handing it over to a Pirate welcoming committee this side of Postoffice Spring," Senator Stewart said, with a laugh, "you're way ahead of the best brains we've been able to muster on the problem."

The Rio Kid felt slightly foolish. "Well—" he grinned— "why not melt these silver bars down and mold them into the shape of cannon balls—each sphere to weigh a quarter of a ton or so? They'd be too heavy for a road agent to load on a pack mule, which is how your bandits have to make a getaway with their loot in this part of the country."

For a long minute, Jones and Stewart stared at each other in amazement, as the sheer genius of the Rio Kid's casually phrased suggestion penetrated their minds.

"Why, J. P., that *would* work!" Stewart finally exclaimed. "It would be physically impossible to steal a five-hundred pound cannon ball of solid silver! Even if a man stole one, he couldn't swap it for gold or folding money!"

J. P. Jones was breathing heavily.

"I'll get the smelter foreman in here at once," the red-bearded mining magnate said excitedly. "Pryor, you've unearthed the obvious solution to our headache. Silver cannon balls! Why, we could ship 'em out in unguarded wagons!"

The reaction of both the mining magnates to his spur-of-the-moment suggestion dumfounded the Rio Kid. To him, this solution of their problem had seemed, as he'd said, too simple to be workable. But already, J. P. Jones was bustling off to his furnace superintendent to get the cannon ball idea in actual operation!

Leaving the mill office, the Rio Kid was unhitching Saber from the mill tie-bar when a nondescript figure shuffled up behind him and spoke a name which put fire and ice in Pryor's veins.

"Rio Kid!"

Pryor spun about, to find himself facing the shaggy derelict who had buttonholed him in the Dexter barroom an hour ago to recount the favorite anecdote in Panamint, the one about the ill-fated Big Mirror.

"How did you know my nickname?"

The barfly grinned, showing toothless gums.

"Hardrock Wilbur," he said, spitting into the dust. "My boss."

The Rio Kid, trained by long experience to conceal emotional shock with the inscrutable calm of an Indian, searched the barfly's eyes. But he could not tell whether the man was a mining camp criminal or whether he had guessed the Rio Kid's mission here and was bearing a tale—to tell at a price.

"My brand happens to be Skidoo Jenkins," the oldster went on. "It was my idea, planting your Mexican pardner's black pony to the hitch-bar in front of the Dexter. Knew that'd draw you inside where Hardrock and me could size you up."

THE Rio Kid had his answer now. This Skidoo Jenkins, an incredibly filthy, odoriferous derelict who represented the dregs of humanity in this boom town, was—as he claimed to be—one of Hardrock Wilbur's underlings. He had baited a trap but for some reason the Rio Kid could not fathom it had not been sprung.

Pryor glanced around the immediate vicinity. This mill office area was some distance removed from the town. Right now, except for the Senators inside the office building at his back, and the stamp mill's personnel, he was alone with Skidoo Jenkins.

But the Rio Kid also realized that at this very moment he might be under the gunsights of Hardrock Wilbur. A strong hunch told him that Wilbur had, within the last few minutes perhaps, detailed Skidoo Jenkins to accost him here.

The Rio Kid took two quick steps which brought him next to the hirsute barfly. His right hand dipped in a blurring up-and-down draw and instantly Skidoo Jenkins's ribs were being prodded by the muzzle of a sixgun.

"I'm checking the bet to you," the Rio Kid breathed between taut lips. "Maybe I'm covered from a window somewhere out of forty-five range, but if I go, I can take you with me. What's the deal?"

Jenkins seemed utterly unconcerned with the danger of the cocked gun reaming his chest.

"You won't pull that trigger, Rio Kid. Me, I'm just Wilbur's errand boy, you might say. Keep an eye on the camp when he's out on his wagon drives. Anyhow, not five minutes ago Wilbur gave me a little knickknack to show you. Want to see it?"

Pryor nodded, a prescience of disaster gripping him hard.

Carefully, the old man unbuttoned his reeking shirt and pulled out a bundle which appeared to be a coiled belt of some kind of soft and pliable leather, probably kangaroo skin.

"Recognize this, Rio Kid?"

Jenkins held the belt by its buckle and let it fall free, uncoiling to reveal itself as a compartmented moneybelt. Protruding from under one of the snap-fastened pocket flaps was a Catholic medallion, attached to a fine gold chain.

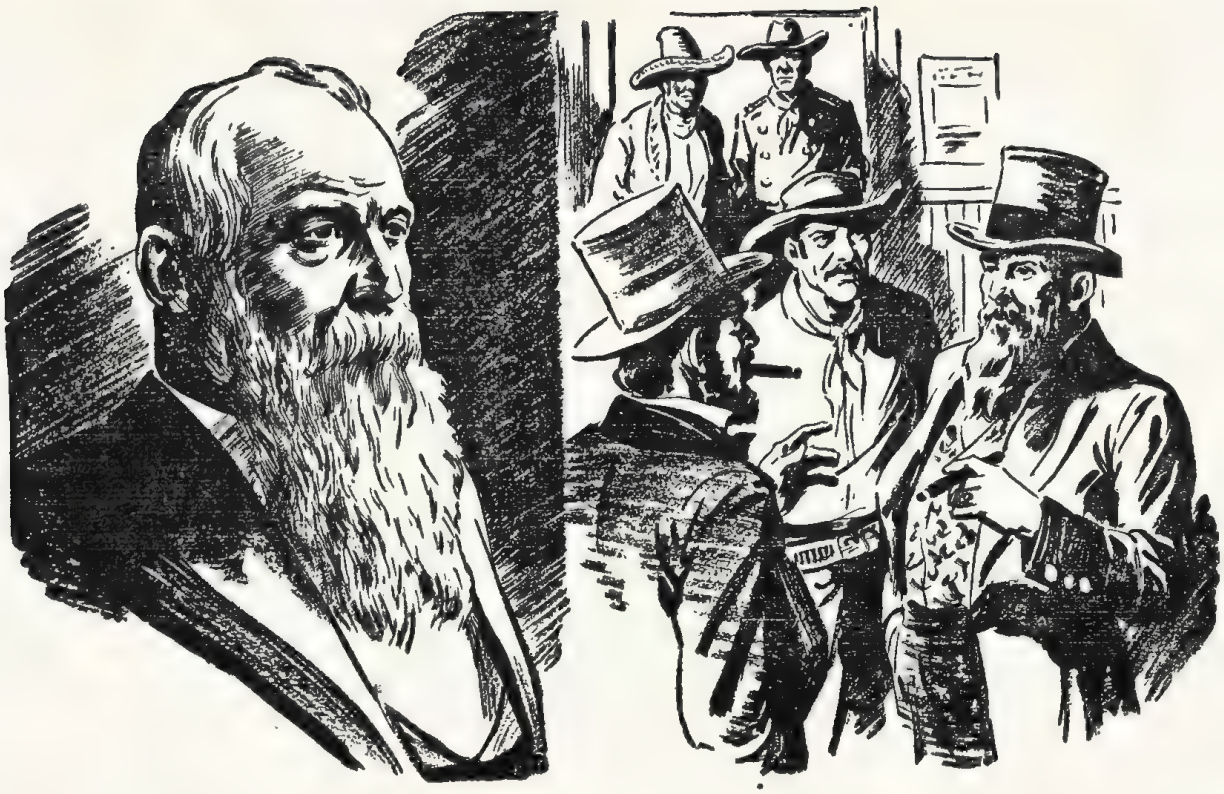
The Rio Kid felt a numb shock flow through him. This was the money-belt Celestino Mireles wore next to his skin! The St. Christopher's medal was a sacred talisman of his faith, worn by all devout Mexicans. These were objects which could not conceivably have been accidentally lost. They had been taken from Celestino forcibly, or perhaps—the thought chilled Bob Pryor—from his dead body!

Slowly the Rio Kid holstered his gun. "You win," he said dully. "This means Hardrock Wilbur has captured my pardner."

Jenkins nodded, restoring the money-belt under his shirt.

"For the record, I dabbed my loop on your Mexican pard, Kid. I was waiting out at the hitch-rack making out like I was cleaning a pack-mule's hoof when this Celestino spotted his black horse. When he come over, all I had to do was tell him to foller me or he wouldn't see the Rio Kid alive ag'in. That, and a derringer persuaded him."

The Rio Kid sucked in a deep breath. The money-belt and the holy medal were convincing proof that Jenkins was not



WILLIAM MORRIS STEWART

ALTHOUGH he was born on a farm in upstate New York in 1829, the name of William Morris Stewart is so linked with Western mining history that he cannot be considered as from the East. He was a sophomore at Yale when gold was discovered in California. Young Bill promptly boarded a steamer for Panama. He crossed the Isthmus afoot, contracting malaria, but managed to board the propeller steamer *Carolina* and arrive at the Mother Lode more dead than alive.

Regaining his health, he became a mulewhacker between Marysville and Grass Valley, and later practiced law in Nevada City, where he built the camp's first sawmill and flume, and assured himself a place in history by drafting the West's first miners' code. Stewart became district attorney, and within two years attorney general for California. He married the daughter of ex-Governor Henry Foote of Mississippi.

In March, 1860, Stewart arrived in Virginia City, Nevada, at the height of the Comstock Lode boom. Here, many times he had to defend his life with the two derringers he habitually carried. When Lincoln was running for his second term, Stewart ran for U. S. Senator from Nevada on the Republican ticket.

Bill Stewart drafted the Fifteenth Amendment to the Constitution, which allowed Negroes to vote. He later declined Grant's offer to appoint him to the Supreme Court. Stewart retired from public life in 1905, and died in 1909, his only assets a horse and wagon. Demonetization of silver had pauperized him.

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bluffing. Celestino, if still alive, was a captive. If he was dead . . . A catastrophe, either way.

"All right," the Rio Kid said. "What's the deal?"

Skidoo Jenkins removed a malodorous corncob from his hip pocket and began stoking it with tobacco. If either one of the Senators chanced to look out the mill office window right now, this scene would not seem out of the ordinary.

"The deal?" Skidoo said, after he got his pipe fired up. "Why, it's simple enough. Wilbur knows you're working for the Senators. He knows Stewart went over to San Berdoo trying to hire a

marshal to clean up the Pirate outfit, so's he can move his bullion. Seeing as how Wilbur himself is kingpin of the Pirates, he don't cotton to you working at your marshal job, Rio Kid. I myself seen Bill Stewart whisper to you in the saloon awhile ago. That's why I had a hunch I'd find you walking out of the Big Mill here."

BOB Pryor felt sick inside as he realized how completely he had been outwitted. It came as no surprise to him, hearing this cool statement from Jenkins that the leader of the outlaw element in Panamint City was the muleskinner who had murdered old Tom Penprose.

Just as surely as if Wilbur had him under a point-blank gun drop, Wilbur had him at his mercy.

In a dead voice, he forced himself to ask, "Is—Celestino still alive?"

Skidoo grinned. "Was, twenty minutes ago. Whether he keeps his health sort of depends on you, Rio Kid."

Pryor stirred impatiently. Jenkin's complete lack of fear was proof that he knew he was entirely safe from arrest as long as the young Mexican's life would be forfeit if the Rio Kid took such action.

"All right, Skidoo, you've played me on the hook long enough. What's Wilbur's price for Celestino's release?"

Jenkins eyed him cagily, tormenting him with his silence for a moment. Then he said, "Plumb simple, feller. You and me ride down Surprise Canyon. I see you on your way—to anywhere, so long as it ain't Panamint City. I come back and report to Hardrock. One week from today, Wilbur will show up at Meyerstein's in San Berdoo, with Celestino as his swamper. Once in San Berdoo, what Celestino does is his own business. He'll be free as a sneeze."

The Rio Kid had hung on every word of Jenkins' ultimatum. But he could plainly see it was a scheme loaded with treachery.

"Wilbur must think I'm a fool, if I'd swallow bait like that," he growled. "So you'd ride with me down Surprise Canyon, would you? Yeah sure—and once away from town, I'd be a prime target for a bushwhacker. Then you'd ride back to help Wilbur bury Celestino. No, Skidoo, I can't buy that proposition."

Jenkins shrugged indolently. "Ain't no skin off'n my hind quarters, what you decide to do, Marshal. It's your problem. I'll just leave you here now to rassle with it."

Jenkins turned to leave, but the Rio Kid reached out a detaining hand. Celestino's capture had nullified his authority here.

"Wait," he said tensely. A vague scheme was shaping up in his mind. "Skidoo, I want you to take me to wherever Celestino is being held hostage. I want to give Hardrock Wilbur a counter proposition—face to face, not with you as go-between."

Jenkins scowled suspiciously, for the first time not certain that he was on safe ground.

"You know, don't you, Kid, that if I take you to the boss it'll have to be with your guns left behind in your saddlebags here? That the minute you come face to face with Wilbur, you'd be his prisoner the same as Celestino is?"

The Rio Kid nodded, perspiration rimming his pores.

"I do. It's a risk I'm prepared to take." As he spoke, he unbuckled his gun harness, coiled the cartridge belts over his holstered Colts, and calmly stowed them in one of Saber's *alforja* bags.

Skidoo Jenkins fingered his beard uncertainly, his toothless gums chomping on his pipestem.

"You got an ace in the hole, some place," he complained nervously. "You ain't so stupid you'd walk into a guntrap."

The Rio Kid shot a glance toward the Steward & Jones stampmill. The plan, born of desperation, was crystalizing in his brain now. The odds against it working out were astronomical, and failure

meant a boothill grave for himself as well as for Celestino Mireles. But if the scheme worked, the power of the Panamint Pirates could be crushed once and for all!

"I won't hold out on you, Skidoo," he said confidently. "I am going to face Hardrock Wilbur wtih a deal he can't refuse. I am going to doublecross the Senators—and buy Celestino's life and my own with Panamint bullion."

Skidoo returned his stare steadily, without blinking. Then abruptly he turned on his heel and headed toward Main Street, jerking his head for the Rio Kid to follow.

"Hardrock might be interested, at that," the old derelict commented, between puffs on his vile-smelling pipe "The risk is all your'n, Rio Kid. I'll take you to Hardrock. If he agrees to a bullion ransom, fine. If he smells a double cross on him, you and your Celestino will be sprawled out in the same grave before sunrise tomorrow morning."

CHAPTER XI

Wilbur's Decision

JENKINS and the Rio Kid shouldered through the ornate colored-glass doors of the Dexter Saloon as casually as two friends who, having met by chance, were on their way for a friendly drink and a bit of conversation.

Moving unhurriedly, Jenkins walked the length of the bar and stopped before the door of one of the numerous private gambling rooms. Pryor was close at his heels.

And, entering the room, the Rio Kid knew that it was better than even odds that it would be the scene of his own murder. It came as an anticlimax to find the room deserted. A partially played-out solitaire layout was on the baize-covered poker table which, with half a dozen chairs, comprised the only furnishings of the cubicle.

Skidoo, sensing that the Rio Kid had expected to find Hardrock Wilbur and Celestino waiting here, chuckled in his beard as he crossed the room to unlock a door opening on a tin-can-and-bottle-littered alley behind the Dexter. The saloon's stock of extra beer and cased bottles was stacked up in this alley, which accounted for the two ends of the area being closed to entry by heavy locked gates. The opposite side of the alley was a high rock and 'dobe wall that was one side of an assay office.

Jenkins crossed the alley and entered an opening between stacks of empty beer barrels and bottle cases. A rivet-studded door of rusty iron plating was set here into the assay office wall. Producing a heavy key from his ragged pants, the barfly unlocked the door and motioned for the Rio Kid to step inside.

Obeying, he found himself in the back room of a typical assay establishment. A brick furnace squatted under an iron chimney directly in front of the alley door. Work benches were littered with racked crucibles and iron molds, cupels and flux bins, acid bottles and test tubes, beakers and discarded ore samples.

When the door was closed, it was too dark in here for the Rio Kid to make out details. The air was stuffy with the fumes of chemicals and charcoal.

He heard Skidoo Jenkins shuffling around off to his left. Then a key rattled in a lock and lamplight spilled into the assay furnace-room as Jenkins opened a door leading into an adjoining room.

A sixgun was in Jenkin's hand as he gestured for the Rio Kid to come forward. Approaching the door, Pryor's heart leaped with surging excitement as he caught sight of Celestino Mireles sitting in a chair alongside a table where an oil lamp burned.

Mireles' arms were trussed behind the chair back, and his legs were bound with rusty chain to the chair legs. He

was staring bleakly at the open door where Skidoo Jenkins stood waiting, and on the young Mexican's face was depicted his complete despair and self-disgust. Physically he appeared to be unharmed.

The next instant, though, Celestino was tugging against his bonds as he saw the Rio Kid step past the barfly's leveled gun. Celestino's expression became one of stark horror as he settled back in the chair.

"General!" he groaned. "I am the most *estupido* hombre who ever crossed the Mexican border, *es seguro*!"

The Rio Kid swept his glance from his partner, sizing up this front office of the assaying establishment. Seated in a swivel chair alongside a rolltop desk littered with assay reports and old mining journals was the erstwhile wagoneer who was the object of Marshal Pryor's Panamint City manhunt—Hardrock Wilbur.

Pure surprise was in Wilbur's eyes as his glance shuttled from the Rio Kid to his accomplice. Old Jenkins closed and locked the furnace room door behind him before speaking.

"Boss," he said then, "he walked in here under his own steam. You told me the Rio Kid could never be baited into coming back here with me, but here he is."

WILBUR got slowly to his feet, thrusting his callused fingertips under his cartridge belts.

"This makes cashing your chips a lot easier than the way I'd figured on, Kid," commented the muleskinner. "Where you made your mistake was coming on to Panamint City in the first place. Celestino's black stallion wasn't worth the price you two are going to pay."

The Rio Kid's glance slid back to his Mexican partner.

"Let's get down to business," he said brusquely. "I didn't shuck my guns and follow this old booze-hound into your Pirate's den because I wanted to die with Celestino, senor."

Wilbur's brows lifted. Skidoo Jenkins pocketed his pipe and drawled succinctly, "Better listen to what the Rio Kid has to tell you, Boss. He thinks he can buy him and the Mex out of this tight."

Wilbur's eyes narrowed suspiciously. Finally he said, "Speak your piece, Kid. It won't hurt none to listen, I reckon."

The Rio Kid folded his arms and rocked on the balls of his feet, fully aware that Skidoo Jenkins was holding a gun on his back. Ten feet separated him from Wilbur, with the heavy table between them. There was no physical way of gaining the upper hand here.

"Here's my proposition, Wilbur," the Rio Kid said. "I am prepared to pay for my life and Celestino's—with four tons of silver bullion from the Stewart and Jones mill."

Celestino's eyes bulged in their sockets as his partner made his astounding proposition. The sound of Wilbur's heavy breathing sawed the gelid silence of this windowless room.

Hardrock sat down in the swivel chair, lacing his hands together and rotating the thumbs. Suspicion and distrust were evident in every twisted line of his satanic countenance, but the magic words "four tons of silver" had a siren sound.

"Go on," he prompted finally.

"Well," the Rio Kid said, "you've already guessed I'm in Panamint City on the Stewart and Jones pay-roll. Just this morning I figured out a way to make the mill's first bullion shipment. That was before I realized my pardner was in your hands. The way the cards are stacked now, I aim to use that bullion to get the two of us out of this tight."

Wilbur released a pent-up breath.

"It'll have to be fool-proof," he warned. "Four tons of bullion—with silver bars weighing fifty pounds apiece—that makes a hundred and sixty ingots. And this is Panamint City. Handing that silver over to the Pirates will take a sure-fire scheme on your part, Kid."

The Rio Kid nodded. The intolerable tension had eased in him now; he was sure of his ground. The mention of a fortune in silver had been a shot in the dark which had hit the bull's-eye. Greed was the weak chink in Wilbur's armor. The outlaw chieftain was giving him his full attention now.

"All right, Wilbur," Pryor said. "I realize that. The deal is this. Gus Stubblefield is going to ship two wagon loads of low-grade ore day after tomorrow, knowing the Pirates wouldn't touch low-grade ore shipments. The wagons will leave Panamint City in broad daylight. The whole town will see them being loaded, up at Stubblefield's claim."

Wilbur nodded, his eyes malevolent bright with curiosity.

"What the town won't know," the Rio Kid went on, "is that tonight, the mill workers are going to tote a hundred and sixty bars of bullion up to Stubblefield's prospect hole. All day tomorrow, the town will see Gus loading ore into his wagons. But inside of each wheelbarrow load will be a couple of silver bars. When the wagon pulls out, half of its load will be Stewart and Jones bullion. And Stubblefield will be paid ten times the value of his low-grade ore when he delivers those wagons in Bakersfield."

Wilbur's face twisted in a dubious frown. "I don't see," he protested, "where this comes into the picture as ransom."

THE Rio Kid gestured patiently. "By midnight tonight," he said, "Stewart and Jones will have their four tons of bar silver deposited in the back of Stubblefield's mine tunnel. The transfer will be made in complete secrecy—no one would suspect the Senators of having a working agreement with a two-bit miner like Stubblefield. Between midnight and sunrise tomorrow is a time lapse of four-five hours. I will be guarding the mouth of the mine tunnel, and I will be waiting for you and your Panamile Pirates to show up and collect that bullion."

It was Skidoo Jenkins who spotted the fallacy in the Rio Kid's astonishing plan.

"We'd show up at the Penprose claim," he pointed out, "and maybe run into a gun-trap. It won't work, Boss."

The Rio Kid, anticipating that objection, said instantly, "You will be holding Celestino, won't you? That's my guarantee that Stewart and Jones men won't be planted behind the rocks waiting for the Pirates to show up."

Wilbur's relief was apparent. It was obvious that he had expected the Rio Kid to demand Celestino's immediate release as his side of the bargain.

The Rio Kid went on hurriedly, "The Senators are detailing twenty men to carry two bars of silver apiece from the mill to Stubblefield's tunnel, under cover of darkness. It will take four round trips for them to transfer the bullion. They'll start work at ten, when it's good and dark. The bullion will be in Gus's tunnel well before twelve tonight."

Hardrock Wilbur nodded uncertainly, half-convinced that the scheme presented no element of danger to his own gang, yet reluctant to seal the bargain with his own approval.

"How many Pirates would you have to get hold of to carry that much silver out of Stubblefield's?" the Rio Kid asked.

Wilbur laughed harshly. "That's a question you'd like to have answered, ain't it?" he jeered. "The size of the Panamint Pirates organization is my business, hombre."

The Rio Kid shrugged, masking his disappointment.

"This scheme won't work," he said, "if you haven't got the manpower available to carry off the bullion. One man can handle two silver bars to the trip. The details are up to you."

Wilbur said cagily, "You'll be guarding that bullion cache after midnight? I can tell you this, Rio Kid—I'll have two-three men planted up the valley, counting the Senators' carriers. If we see twenty men go into that tunnel, we'll

want to see twenty come out, empty-handed."

The Rio Kid nodded. "I expected you to take precautions, for your own protection. In return, when you show up at say one o'clock tomorrow morning, before I turn the mine over to you I'll expect Celestino delivered at my side, safe and unharmed."

Hardrock Wilbur stood up.

"All right," he agreed. "But don't try a doublecross, Kid. Don't try to plant gunhawks anywhere between town and Stubblefield's claim. I get a glimmer of anything fishy going on, I'll personally stick a knife in the Mexican's ribs."

The Rio Kid turned to Celestino. "I reckon you know, amigo, I wouldn't lure Wilbur into a gun-trap as long as your safety is at stake, don't you?"

Young Mireles managed a feeble grin. "I am een no position to make the protest, General."

The Rio Kid turned back to where Skidoo Jenkins still held him under the threat of a gun drop.

"I'll see you, then, around one o'clock in the morning, up at the entrance to Stubblefield's mine," he told the barfly. "Bring Celestino with you, and as many Pirates as you think you need to walk away with four tons of silver."

SKIDOO JENKINS glanced at the Pirates' boss, got Hardrock's nod, and unlocked the door. Celestino watched the Rio Kid make his departure, and ten minutes later saw Skidoo return alone.

"Pryor's headed for the Big Mill," Skidoo reported. "We better hustle this Mexican over to Jake Fosmer's shack, Boss, in case that Rio Kid hustles up a posse and raids this assay office."

Hardrock Wilbur nodded agreement to this precautionary measure.

"We'll play this close to the vest all the way," he said. "I think Pryor is on the level. It ain't his silver he's dickering with. And I figure he'd do anything, even doublecross the Senators, to keep Celestino here from being salivated."

Skidoo said nervously, "How you aim to make sure the Rio Kid ain't fixing to trap us up at Stubblefield's tonight, Boss?"

Wilbur shrugged. "First of all, you start making the rounds, telling the Pirates to show up behind Fosmer's shack after dark tonight. I'll take care of scouting Stubblefield's claim myself."

Skidoo nodded, scowling worriedly. "How many of the boys do you want to work this job?"

"Every man we got. That's eighteen, counting us. We'll need that many to handle four tons of bullion, I figure."

Wilbur was busy unfastening the chains from Celestino's legs, in preparation for moving their prisoner to another hideout.

"As soon as I figure it's safe to work with the Rio Kid," Wilbur said, "we'll move that silver out of Stubblefield's place fast. Tomorrow, if anybody shows up at the claim, they'll find four dead ones inside of that tunnel of old Penprose's."

"Four?" Skidoo Jenkins echoed.

"The Rio Kid and Celestino, young Stubblefield and the Penprose girl. The dead don't talk, remember, Skidoo? That's the motto of the Pirates of Panamint, ain't it?"

CHAPTER XII

Panamint Treasure

UNEARTHLY bright were the stars over Surprise Valley. Bright enough for Hardrock Wilbur to read the dial of his watch. The hands stood at straight-up twelve midnight.

This marked nine hours that the leader of the Panamint Pirates had been hidden out in this shallow fissure on the valley slope, less than fifty yards away from Tom Penprose's

cabin. Wilbur had stationed himself at this spying post at three o'clock in the afternoon, after crawling most of the distance down the eroded wash on his belly.

From behind a screen of creosote brush, he had been able to observe everything that had gone on at Gus Stubblefield's two-bit claim. He had seen the Reverend Orne pay a visit to the rock cabin, in company with several miners who were friends of young Gus. With them had been the Rio Kid, on the surface the most carefree of the party.

Wavie Penprose had been united in marriage to Stubblefield this afternoon, Wilbur knew. And of course the newlyweds were blissfully unaware that tragedy was to overshadow their wedding night, if the Panamint Pirates followed their orders from Wilbur.

Seven outsiders had visited the Stubblefield claim during the afternoon, all members of the wedding party; and seven had left after supper, returning to town. A short time after that, only the Rio Kid had returned to rejoin the bride and groom. For the first time since he had taken over the Penprose claim, Stubblefield had not put in a day's work in the mine.

With the coming of darkness, Wilbur had redoubled his vigilance. Now was the time, if the Rio Kid was planning a trap, that gun-hung members of the Stewart & Jones crew would sneak up to the mine to hide themselves in readiness to spring a trap on Wilbur's renegades. But the passing hours had brought no suspicious action. It was all quiet here, for the wind was carrying the ceaseless rumble of the stamp mill and concentrating vats away from Wilbur's ears.

Then, at ten o'clock, the first of the Stewart & Jones treasure bearers began arriving at the mine. To reach it, they had to pass within a dozen feet of Wilbur's hideout. And starlight glinted unmistakably on the fifty-pound bars of treasure which each of the twenty workmen were smuggling up to Stubblefield's.

One by one, the mill hands entered the Penprose tunnel, deposited their bullion, and made their way back to the mill for their second trip. They moved with the utmost caution, never speaking. There was no smoking, no undue noise.

By eleven o'clock, the twenty workmen had completed their fourth trip, each bearing two bars of bullion to the hiding place the Rio Kid had arranged. A hundred and sixty bars in all, representing two tons in total weight, pure silver ready for the mint.

By transferring pebbles from one hand to the other, Wilbur made sure that none of the twenty mill men remained back at the mine tunnel. One by one, as they had come, they headed back toward town, their part in the Rio Kid's plan completed.

Tomorrow the bridgegroom, Gus Stubblefield, would work all day loading ore into his wagons, secreting the Stewart & Jones treasure in the innocent-appearing cargo. The plan was ingenious, Wilbur was forced to admit.

His watch registered half-past twelve when he heard a faint sound in the dry wash behind him. He turned and saw Skidoo Jenkins slithering through the brush toward him, according to previous arrangement.

"Coast seem clear, Boss?" the old barfly whispered.

Wilbur nodded, his face gleaming with sweat in the starshine.

"The Rio Kid hasn't planted any guards between here and town," he said. "I'm dead positive of that. The gang ready?"

"The whole caboodle are waiting behind Fosmer's shack, Boss."

"Celestino with 'em?"

"He's with 'em. We already got the hole dug back of Fosmer's where we can dump that bullion and bury it, Boss."

WILBUR nodded, his heart slamming his ribs.

"All right. Bring the boys up by the trail over the talus. Keep the Mexican gagged and tied up."

Skidoo Jenkins slithered away in the darkness.

With infinite caution, Wilbur crawled out of the shallow gulch and scaled the steep valley wall until he was level with the entrance to Stubblefield's mine. A cigarette coal ebbed and glowed inside the black maw of the tunnel. That would be the Rio Kid, standing guard over the treasure.

Stubblefield and his bride were over in Penprose's rock shack, unaware of the menace shaping up out here.

It was ten minutes after one when Skidoo Jenkins arrived at Wilbur's rendezvous. Beside him was Celestino Mireles, a gag over his mouth, his hands tied behind his back. The sixteen miners and bartenders, wagoneers and mining-camp riffraff who made up the secret roster of the Pirate gang were in a double file behind Skidoo.

"All right, men," Wilbur said crisply. "I'll go up and take the Rio Kid's challenge. When I whistle, come on up. I've scouted this thing. We're running no risk of an ambush."

The Pirates gathered nervously around Jenkins and the Mexican prisoner as Hardrock Wilbur left the gully and began scrambling noisily up the tailing dump toward the yawning dark opening of the Penprose mine.

Wilbur had gained the level top of the dump when the Rio Kid stepped out into the starlight, a rifle tucked under one arm. The two men stood facing each other at arm's length.

"You came alone?" the Rio Kid whispered.

"I've got a squad of men with me—enough to lug that silver out in two trips."

"And my pardner?"

"He's with us. I turn him over to you as soon as we make sure that bullion is the real McCoy and not some kind of a decoy, Kid."

The Rio Kid nodded. "The silver is stacked up at the back end of the tunnel, fifty feet in. I want you to work as quietly as possible, so as not to arouse Gus and Wavie. It won't do for them to know *I* rigged this doublecross on the Senators."

The shadows of Wilbur's hat-brim masked his grin as he sent his whistle signal into the night. Within moments, Skidoo Jenkins and Celestino, as well as every member on the Pirate roster, had gathered on the level space in front of the mine.

"Follow me," the Rio Kid said in a low voice, and turned to lead the way into the inky tunnel.

A dozen yards inside the rocky grotto, where it made a right-angled turn, he fumbled in the darkness to find a lantern hanging from a nail on a shoring timber. Lighting it, knowing that its rays would not be visible from Surprise Valley, the Rio Kid moved on into the depths of the tunnel, Wilbur and his Panamint Pirates crowding close behind.

The yellow rays of the lantern revealed the dead end of the passage, where a vein had petered out on a fault. Glittering under the lantern's beams were the hundred and sixty bars of pure white silver bearing the Stewart & Jones mill stamp, the bullion tiered up in neat stacks like so many bricks.

Off to the left was the black entrance of an auxiliary mine shaft marking the working area of the Penprose claim. The Rio Kid set his lantern down on the rubble floor of the cavern and moved around so that he stood with his back to the forking passage.

"All right!" he said hoarsely. "There's your silver. What you do with it now is no concern of mine. I want Celestino released—now! He and I will wait here until daylight before we sound the alarm."

THE Pirates of Panamint crowded forward into the stope, mumbling excitedly, gathering around the piled-up bullion. Celestino stood between Skidoo Jenkins and Hardrock Wilbur, facing the Rio Kid in the mouth of the side tunnel.

"You've kept your share of the bargain, Kid," Wilbur drawled, grinning. "Now's the time, I reckon, for our payoff."

As he spoke, he dropped one shoulder in the telltale gesture of a gunman getting ready to dig iron from leather. Instantly the Rio Kid dropped to a crouch, swinging Stubblefield's rifle to a quick level. Wilbur's Colt was half out of leather when the rifle in the hands of Bob Pryor, Marshal of Panamint, spat flame, driving its steel-jacketed .30-30 missile through the precise center of Hardrock Wilbur's forehead.

Reversing the single-shot Springfield, the Rio Kid flung it stock-foremost at old Skidoo Jenkins, smashing the oldster in the temple and dropping him like a sledged steer in a chute.

So quickly had this showdown transpired that the closely-packed members of the treasure-raiding Pirates were still frozen in their tracks when Bob Pryor leaped to grab Celestino by the arm.

Hardrock Wilbur's lifeless body was toppling backward when an ear-riving explosion came from the mouth of the tunnel. These miners recognized a dynamite shot when they heard one. Of one accord they hunkered down as loose rock began raining down from the ceiling of the cavern.

A concussion wave knocked Celestino forward as the Rio Kid was steering him off down the side passage. The Rio Kid was taking the young Mexican down this side tunnel which looped back to its opening immediately behind Gus Stubblefield's cabin. A map of the mine would have shown it resembling a letter "Y."

The dynamite explosion had extinguished the lantern. Before the panic-stricken renegades had time to collect their senses, they heard the Rio Kid's warning shout from the depths of that side tunnel:

"Don't anybody move! The mouth of

[*Turn page*]

oh-oh, Dry Scalp!

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the main tunnel has been caved in by that blast of Stubblefield's. The first hombre who tries to follow Celestino and me will be shot down!"

In the darkness, he slashed Calestino's wrist thongs with a bowie blade and reached up to remove his partner's gag. Then, working their way through Stygian blackness choked with rock dust and dynamite fumes, they came into the open air, with the lamplighted door and windows of Stubblefield's cabin directly before them.

Young Stubblefield was crouched behind the rock house, his fists still gripping the plunger of the detonator box which had touched off the dynamite charge in the ceiling of the other tunnel mouth, bringing down tons of country rock to seal that exit hole.

"Gus and I planted that charge this afternoon," the Rio Kid explained to the grinning Celestino. "The only way Wilbur's hardcases can get out now is through this side exit—and one man with a gun can keep them penned up until we're ready to let 'em out."

Wavie Penprose—or Mrs. August Stubblefield, as her name had been since three o'clock this afternoon—appeared in the doorway and handed her husband a Winchester which Celestino recognized as the Rio Kid's. Stubblefield would spend his wedding night keeping guard over the trapped Pirates.

From that black hole in the cliff's base they could hear the dismayed shouts of the imprisoned renegades.

"I have *muy bueno* news for you, General," Celestino said, getting his voice back for the first time since his rescue. "Those *malo hombres* in there make up entire Pirates gang, *es verdad.* I heard Señor Wilbur say so heemself."

"And the camp thought there were two hundred of 'em!" chuckled Gus Stubblefield. "Your idea worked, Rio Kid. You got the whole caboodle."

CAPTAIN BOB PRYOR—Marshal Pryor—walked past Wavie, into the cabin. He said to Celestino, "You wait here, 'Tino, while I ride down to the mill and let Stewart and Jones know the outcome of this business. They staked four tons of bullion to bait this man-trap. I knew the scheme depended on me working it alone—Wilbur wouldn't have fallen for the bait it he'd caught me smuggling a posse up here. As it was I had to depend on Gus's dynamite skill. If that shot hadn't been planted just right, it could have crushed all of us in the far end of the tunnel."

As he headed out the front door of the cabin to where Saber stood bridled and saddled, Celestino Mireles turned to grin at Wavie. She looked radiantly beautiful, standing there beside her husband in the rear doorway.

"Eet ees the *Americano* custom to let the bride be keesed, no, Señor Gus?" Celestino demanded boldly, holding out his arms to the girl.

Outside the cabin, Saber's hoof beats made their rhythm of the night as the Rio Kid headed down into the valley to let the two Senators know that the outlaw faction in Panamint City had been brought under control. But the coming weeks would see Stewart & Jones silver cannonballs leaving Surprise Canyon without even the necessity of a guard.

Gus Stubblefield, keeping his eye on the mine tunnel, said with feigned alarm, "One kiss and no more, Celestino. I've heard about how you handsome Latins make love. I don't want Wavie to find out what she missed, marrying a Hoosier Casanova!"

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MASKED RIDER WESTERN and RANGE RIDERS WESTERN

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Charley Carter was a hard man to rile, but once his dander was up—LOOK OUT!

Della felt a great rush of blood to her cheeks

The Saga of COWPEN CENTER

By BEN FRANK

ON THIS Saturday in late fall, if worries had turned to rain, it's likely that the Cowpen Center settlement would have been flooded nineteen feet deep! There was Charley Carter's Uncle Clam, Della Delaney,

Preacher Perry, the Widow Walker, the Professor—about everybody you could think of at the moment had a batch of worries on his mind.

Take young Charley Carter himself, for example. At twenty-two, he was a rusty-haired cowboy with long arms and legs and a sad brown face. Riding along the rocky trail toward his lonely home on the Bar C, he looked like the weight of the world's worst woes rested upon his broad shoulders. Which was the way he felt, for his partner and only living relative, Uncle Clam Carter, had gone completely loco.

"The way my heart does flip-flops now and then," Uncle Clam had said a few days ago, "I reckon I ain't long for this world. So if I'm going to write the history of myself and Cowpen Center, I got to get busy, pronto!"

Without another word, the whiskery old coot had packed a few things, bought himself an armload of tablet paper and four dozen pencils and moved into an old log cabin that stood on a lonely and deserted corner of the Bar C. His departure had left poor Charley with all the cares and responsibilities of running the ranch.

Charley sure felt beat-up. Added to his worry about his Uncle Clam's losing his mind was the fact that a neighboring rancher, Whamdoodle Rasher, was inclined to be hoggish about range and water. Back in the old days, Uncle Clam had kept this unsavory skunk corralled, but now it was up to Charley. And at heart, Charley was a kind and peace-loving soul who wouldn't hurt a rattler crawling up his leg if he could help it.

Lifting weary eyes, he observed that he had come to the Cowpen school-house, which stood at a cross road. Della Delaney was the teacher now, but Charley seldom gave her a thought. She was just a girl who'd been a pest ever since he could remember. Now that she had grown up and got herself educated, she wore horn-rimmed glasses and did her hair in a bun on the top of her head and—well, thank goodness, she didn't no longer pester him like she had when she was a kid!

TURNING the corner at the school, he met Preacher Perry, a kindly old fellow who went about with a cheery smile and a pleasant word for one and all. If Charley had known how worried the preacher was about whether his wife would get to go to the spring meeting of lady missionaries held in the city—but Charley didn't know.

He rode on past the Widow Walker's small farm home, never once suspecting that she was worried sick about her young son, and about making a living on her poor land. And, of course, Charley didn't know that the Professor, a restless gent who made a few dollars tuning pianos and playing in saloons, had spent a night in the haystack behind the widow's sway-back barn. Or that the Professor was filled with worry from his derby to his pointed-toe shoes. Poor Charley simply supposed that he himself was the only person in the county who had any troubles.

Coming to the tall pine timber at the bend of Cowpen Creek, he took a sudden notion to find a cool spot to sit and think over his problems. Leaving his horse, he wandered upstream until he found a mossy boulder. So he sat down to think. But a sound made him glance up. What he saw coming his way caused him to forget he had a single, solitary thing in the whole world to worry him!

At this very moment, Uncle Clam was sharpening his pencils with a jack-knife and stewing about Charley. It seemed to him that his brainless nephew wasn't never going to grow up, fight his own battles, or find himself a wife.

That was the real reason Clam had left the Bar C and gone to live here in the cabin. He figured maybe it would help Charley settle down to being a man if he had to run the ranch by himself. But now, Clam wasn't so sure. Charley had just paid him a visit and acted like a six-year-old with a stomachful of green apples.

"Dag-nabbit!" the oldster fumed. "I oughtn't to have spoiled him when he was a kid, I guess!"

While Uncle Clam cussed and fumed, the Professor sat in one corner of a swaying box-car, headed south for the winter. He was a bald little varmint, who believed in free train rides and green checkered store suits. Between his thin knees rested a worn leather bag which contained his piano tuning tools; and between his deep-set, somewhat bleary eyes lay a heavy frown. He had lost his most treasured possession—a diamond-set wedding ring.

The Professor felt a great and sentimental attachment for that thin circle of gold, studded with five small diamonds. Not that it had ever belonged to any wife of his. The fact is, he'd never stayed in one place long enough at a time to acquire a wife. But this ring, which he'd won many years ago with a lucky toss of dice, meant security to him. Any time he got flat busted, with that ring he could get a loan. More times than he could count, that circle of gold had kept him out of jail, or from going hungry.

He put a hand into the vest pocket which had sprung a leak and lost his ring.

"When I head back north next spring," he vowed, "I'll keep my eyes open. Maybe somebody'll find my ring by then, and I'll get it back, or—"

As the freight train sped southward, the Widow Walker sat in her small front room, gazing worriedly at her overgrown twelve-year-old son. Tommy had been a good boy until he had fallen under the influence of Whamdoodle Rasher's no-account boy, Rufe. The widow sighed forlornly. Life was pretty tough for a woman trying to raise a boy and run a farm without a man around to help her.

AS FOR Della Delaney that Saturday morning, she stayed at home alone while her pa and ma went to the store in Cowpen Center. She was a small, pleasant-faced girl with good sound teeth, an eye-catching figure and light brown hair that wanted to hang in curls and make her look like sweet-sixteen, not like a hard-boiled schoolma'am. That was why she wore her hair in a bun on top of her head. And she also wore those hideous horn-rimmed glasses to give her a stern appearance that was supposed to awe the kids who attended the Cowpen school.

But she couldn't awe Rufe Rasher. And the way he influenced young Tommy Walker to misbehave was enough to make her sick when she thought about it.

Sighing worriedly, Della climbed the stairs to the attic of the Delaney ranch home and began to search for some old magazines to take to school for the little kids. But her eyes strayed to an old trunk, and the next thing she knew, she'd lifted the lid and was gazing down wistfully at her grandma's old wedding dress. Della was twenty-one; her grandma had been married at sixteen.

She thought, Gee whiz! I'm darned near an old maid!

She held the dress up to her. White, fluffy, lacy, smelling of mothballs. Then before she hardly knew it, she had slipped into the dress.

It was a good fit. Blushing faintly, she caught up the long white train and ran downstairs to have a look at herself in the mirror.

She didn't much like what she saw. So she took off her glasses, unpinned her hair and let it tumble about her shoulders. She let the white train fall gently to the floor. Now the picture she made suited her much better. And seeing herself dressed like a bride, naturally she thought of the only boy she'd ever really gone overboard for. Charley Carter!

But Charley didn't have any heart flutters over her. Oh, sure, he'd taken her places occasionally, but he'd talked of nothing but cattle, horses and coon hunting, which were mighty boresome subjects on a moonlight night.

Looking at herself in the mirror, she thought of weddings and organ music.

It made her sad and dreamy, and the next thing she knew, she was wandering toward the tall pines along the bend of Cowpen Creek, the place where she always went when she felt sad and dreamy and lonely like this. The trees reminded her of a great cathedral; it was a beautiful place to be.

Della, wearing her grandma's wedding gown, was what Charley had seen coming toward him as he sat on the mossy boulder.

You can't blame the rusty-haired cow nurse for forgetting all his worries. Without her glasses and with her hair blowing in the breeze and catching the sun, Della was a lovely sight. She made Charley feel as fluttery as a barrel of butterflies. He had never before thought of her as someone who might become a bride. The thought gave him an awful jolt. Then, suddenly, his heart was pounding like a carload of bass drummers.

Now, you can hardly say that Charley was romantic-minded. Just let any young man see a pretty, starry-eyed girl dressed in a lacy wedding gown, and it does something to him. Slowly Charley arose from the mossy boulder.

"Della!" he said hoarsely.

Now Della was walking in a dream world all her own down a great church aisle to sweet organ music. Hearing her name called, she jumped about three feet straight into the air.

"Gosh!" Charley gurgled shakily. "I didn't know you could ever look like that, Della!"

DELLA felt a great rush of blood to her cheeks and got her feet tangled up in the long train. She felt like a fool.

"Della," Charley croaked, "you're about the—"

She got her feet untangled and ran. She'd never felt so embarrassed in her life, letting him catch her acting like a silly schoolgirl. Racing into her home, she shut and locked the door. She kicked out of the dress and stuffed it back into the old trunk. She didn't think she'd ever be able to look Charley Carter in the eyes again as long as she lived.

At first, Charley didn't follow her. He didn't have the strength. He sank back on the boulder and tried to think what had happened to him. Then he wondered if Della was about to get married to somebody. This thought scared him into action.

He stumbled through the timber to the Delaney ranch house. Finding the door locked, he pounded on it with both fists.

"Go away!" Della yelled at him.

"Della," he asked in a frightened voice, "you about to get married?"

She laughed a little wildly through the door at him.

"Get married? Me? Not so you could notice it. Now, beat it and—"

"What was you doing in that wedding dress?"

"I guess I can put on my grandma's wedding dress any time I want to," she yelled back at him, suddenly furious at being kidded this way.

Somewhat relieved, Charley ambled back to where he'd left his horse and rode on toward the Bar C. But he was puzzled. It wasn't like Della to run from him and lock him out of her home. Suddenly he began to worry again.

When he got home, the place seemed so lonely he couldn't stand it. So he rode on toward the little town of Cowpen Center, figuring on cheering himself up with some talk with the citizens.

But nothing worked out right that worrisome Saturday. No sooner had he landed in town than he saw Whamdoodle Rasher heading toward him. Whamdoodle was a big coyote. He looked as mean as a seven-toed bull with a burr under his tail. Eying Charley maliciously, he hitched up his gunbelt and kept coming.

"Howdy, Carter," he said, spitting between a gap in his front teeth. "How you getting along with the Bar C, now that your uncle has gone off the handle and took up writing a book?"

"So, so," Charley answered, wishing

he was some place else.

"I'm a peacable man," Whamdoodle lied with a sour grin, "but I don't aim to be crowded."

"I'm not the one who's doing the crowding," Charley croaked. "I saw some of your steers eating Bar C grass the other day, but I didn't—"

"So what?" Whamdoodle cut in, sticking out his whiskery chin. "Can I help it if a steer strays onto your lousy grass?"

"Well—" Charley began cautiously.

"Want to make something out of it, Carter?"

Charley shook his head. He'd always had someone else to do his fighting for him. He didn't want no trouble.

Whamdoodle took his thumbs from under his gunbelt and spat again. Grinning, he swaggered back into the saloon.

Charley felt red-faced and goose-pimply. He hoped nobody had witnessed this humilating episode. Having lost his desire to visit with his friends, he swung into saddle and rode back homeward.

HOWEVER, back in town, the encounter between Charley and Whamdoodle had been observed by a number of upright citizens who had been holding a conference in Ollie Ott's hardware store. They were all a little afraid of the swaggering range hog and despised him from the ground up.

"I wished Charley would of knocked that skunk loose from his teeth!" Ollie muttered darkly.

"Me, too!" Deacon Fry said, giving an angry tug to his chin whiskers. "But he didn't, so let's get back to figuring our church finances."

"The way I look at it," Ed Hopper, the banker, said, "we can't decide much before the first of the year. I make a motion we put off deciding if the preacher's wife can go to that convention next spring."

"Second the motion," Ollie Ott said . . .

Despite all his worries, Charley couldn't forget how wonderful Della had looked to him. It got so he couldn't sleep or eat for thinking about it. So late one afternoon, he saddled his cayuse and rode to the schoolhouse to have another close look at her. Wanted to see if his eyes hadn't played tricks on him.

It was after school hours, but Della was still there. And so was Rufe Rasher and Tommy Walker. They had been causing trouble all day, and she'd kept them in, hoping to calm them down. She wasn't having any luck.

Glancing out the window, she saw Charley approaching, and her heart skipped a beat and then began to pound. She figured he was coming to see her. Remembering how silly she'd felt when he'd caught her parading in the wedding dress, she wanted to hide some place. But she didn't have a chance to escape, so she dismissed the two troublemakers, powdered her nose and tightened the bun on the top of her head. By then, Charley was legging it across the front porch.

"How nice to see you, Charley!" she said, acting surprised.

Charley took a long, careful look at her. A long drab skirt, a white blouse, horn-rimmed specks, her hair skinned back, making her look like a peeled onion. It was hard to believe this was the girl he'd seen floating toward him under the tall pines, lovely to look at in silks and satins. He suddenly had a let-down feeling.

"Just riding by and thought I'd say hello," he muttered.

She could tell that he was on the verge of hurrying away, and not wanting that to happen, said, "You came just in time to help me move the bookcase."

Of course, there wasn't nothing for Charley to do but move the bookcase for her. By the time he'd got that done, she'd maneuvered him into dating her up for the Saturday night dance in Cowpen Center.

"Thanks for helping me, Charley," she said, taking off her glasses and flashing him a smile.

She had soft, lovely eyes, sort of a warm reddish-brown color. Charley felt

a slight tingle run over him. She returned the glasses to her face and tightened a pin in the bun on her head. Charley sighed faintly.

"See you Saturday," he mumbled, and made a hasty departure.

Feeling lower than a cellarful of post holes, Della slumped down on the chair behind her desk. She wondered if she hadn't might as well give up on Charley. And remembering her trouble with Rufe and Tommy, it seemed that she might as well give up trying to be a teacher.

Poor Della, she actually felt too miserable to break down and cry. She just sat there, looking old and raising a crop of frown wrinkles on her pretty young face.

ON THE way back to the Bar C, Charley cut through the north end of his range and ran across a bunch of steers that belonged to Whamdoodle Rasher. Charley snorted and cussed, but left the steers alone. Let Whamdoodle take an inch, and he'd take a mile, Charley knew. Well, he guessed he'd better talk it over with Uncle Clam.

When Charley rode up, Uncle Clam sat on the sunny side of the log cabin, sharpening his four dozen pencils. He refused to look Charley in the eyes.

"It's like this, son," he muttered from behind his whiskers. "Us writing folks ain't got no time for ordinary troubles of common everyday people like you. So you're just wasting your time, coming here to talk to me."

Charley gave up and went home.

Back at the cabin, Uncle Clam broke the points off his pencils and began another round of sharpening.

"All anybody has to do," he muttered to himself, "is call that Whamdoodle coyote's bluff. But I'll be dogged if I'll do it for Charley!"

Saturday night, Charley slicked up and took Della to the dance. Della slicked up, too, but she wore her glasses and took all the curl out of her soft brown hair with two-dozen hairpins.

All the way to town, Charley talked about cattle and horses. Except when he mentioned the fact that it was getting to be the time of year when a man should ought to go coon hunting. Della sat listlessly on the other side of the buggy seat, halfway wishing she'd stayed at home.

There was quite a crowd at the dance, including Whamdoodle Rasher with a few snorts of red-eye under his belt. He stood around with his thumbs in his vest pockets, watching Charley and Della with a sneer on his ugly mouth.

"That teacher," he said to Ollie Ott, the hardware merchant, "ain't learning my Rufe a danged thing."

Later, during an intermission, he cornered Charley alone.

"Carter," he said, "I'm a peacable man, but I don't aim to let nobody push me around!"

"Nobody's pushing you," Charley said.

His forehead covered with a clammy sweat, he escaped into the darkness. He knew what he ought to do. He ought to have a showdown with Whamdoodle before things went any farther. But Charley Carter had never had to fight any battles and didn't seem able to get started now.

Taking Della home that night, the long-legged ranny didn't even talk about cattle, horses and coon hunting. He hardly said a word, he was so worried about the way troubles were piling up on him.

Della didn't have much to say, either. It made her feel like crying, the way all this beautiful moonlight was going to waste.

At her door, she tipped her face up to him expectantly. Nothing happened.

"Aren't you going to kiss me good night?" she asked.

The big lug bent over and kissed her daintily on the cheek and then hurried away like he could hardly wait to get home.

Nothing much happened after that until along toward spring. Then the Widow Walker tore up the haystack behind her barn to feed to her cows.

She stuck a pitchfork into a clump of hay, and a ring rolled out and landed at her feet. She picked it up and stared at it in amazement.

She hadn't no more idea than nothing how it had got into her haystack. Didn't know that the Professor had slept there. But one glance at that row of sparkling diamonds told her that it was a pretty valuable find. That is, if she could only think of someone who was in the market for a wedding ring. She put it carefuly into a pocket of her overalls and finished feeding her skinny old cows.

THAT evening after she'd sent young Tommy to bed—she'd had a row with him, for he was getting more like Rufe Rasher every day—she examined the ring again. To save her life, she couldn't think of anyone around Cowpen Center who would want to buy a wedding ring. Only young unmarried couple was Charley Carter and Della Delaney. But Charley didn't seem to have no yen to marry Della.

Suddenly the widow had an inspiration. Her sister's girl, Goldie Gibbons!

Goldie could do worse than to marry a prosperous rancher who was young and not too bad-looking. Not that the widow was a callous schemer. She simply had to have seed corn to plant in the spring, or lose her farm. Anyway, no young man should have to live alone on a lonely ranch.

Smiling faintly, she got out paper and pen and began to write:

> Dear Goldie, Tommy and I would love to have you come here for a visit and—

Down South, the Professor had just finished playing the piano in a dingy saloon. For his efforts he had received a mug of beer, a free lunch and a newspaper. Tipping back his derby, he scanned the weather reports hopefully. Any time now the winter up North should begin to break. Once it broke, he would begin the search for his lost ring.

He sighed deeply. Not having that ring to fall back upon had certainly kept his nose to the grindstone. He hadn't once dared go on a bender. He'd just tuned one piano after another all winter. The truth is, for the first time in his life, he had saved some money for a rainy day.

An item caught his eye. Up North, the ice was beginning to break up on the lower streams. Come Sunday, he decided, he'd head back toward Cowpen Center, taking his own sweet time, of course, tuning pianos and playing for beer and free lunches on the way.

It so happened that on this same Sunday, Goldie Gibbons arrived at the Widow Walker's small home for a visit.

She was a tall, slim girl with yellow hair and sky-blue eyes. She kissed her aunt on the cheek and said, "How nice of you to invite me here!" Goldie didn't know she was part of a hoped-for wedding ring deal.

The widow had invited Charley over for Sunday dinner. Poor Charley—without his Uncle Clam around to help with the cooking he was practically starved to death.

Stepping into the widow's home, he was met with the smells of good cooking and his first glimpse of Goldie Gibbons. The food smelled so delicious to him that Goldie looked wonderful, even if strange girls did have a way of scaring him half to death.

"Pleased to meetcha," he managed.

Goldie looked the long, lean cowboy over. His face wasn't anything to write home about, but the haunted expression in his eyes appealed to her mothering instincts.

She smiled and said, "It's nice to know you, Charley."

It's anybody's guess how the widow's scheme would have turned out. But when Della Delaney heard that Charley had got himself a new girl, she really got down to business. For the first time, she had a rival besides cattle, horses and coon hunting. It gave her a cold, sickish feeling in the pit of her stomach. So she went to her favorite spot among the tall

pines. She sat down on the mossy boulder beside the stream, cupped her round chin in her hands and gave serious thought to her vain efforts to snag Charley.

ONLY once, she realized, had Charley ever shown enough interest in her to follow her around. And that was the day he'd caught her wearing her grandma's old wedding dress.

A sudden thought made her sit up straight.

At the time, she'd had a notion that he'd followed her home to make fun of her. But now, come to think of it, he hadn't done any laughing. He'd sounded downright serious when he'd spoken her name. His voice had even seemed a little hoarse and unsteady.

Her heart began to beat hard and fast. Perhaps if Charley could see her again, dressed in that wedding gown, with her hair hanging in loose curls and—

But she couldn't just throw herself at him in that wedding dress, because he might catch on to what she was up to. She had her pride, Della did, and no proud girl wants a man to think she's trying to run him down. Then remembering she was getting up a school program, her eyes narrowed thoughtfully.

Back in Cowpen Center, Preacher Perry and his good wife were in a stew. The finance committee hadn't decided whether to send Mrs. Perry to the missionary meeting or not.

"Let's don't fret about it," Mrs. Perry said.

She went over to the battered old piano and began to play her husband's favorite hymns. Before long, she saw some of the worry go out of his eyes.

In the meantime, the Professor was working his way north. So far, he hadn't found a trace of the wedding ring. So he kept hanging onto his money, hoping to feel as secure as he'd felt in the good old days when he'd had the ring in his pocket. But he doubted that all the money in the world could take the place of the diamond-studded circle of gold.

The Widow Walker watched her hatched-up romance between Charley and Goldie with a hopeful eye. But it seemed that Goldie didn't much hanker for life on a lonely ranch. And Charley, even if he did cooperate by taking Goldie places, didn't show any signs of losing his head over her. The widow was mighty discouraged. It looked as if she wasn't going to have a market for the wedding ring soon enough to enable her to buy seed corn for the spring planting.

As for Charley's Uncle Clam, he'd sharpened his four dozen pencils down to nubs, and what he'd written about himself and Cowpen Center would hardly fill a postcard.

Then Della had her spring program at the school.

Naturally Charley had to go, because Della insisted he was the only man in the county strong enough to shift the scenery.

"I'm counting on you, Charley," she said. And that was that.

As for Goldie, she was thinking about going back home. She'd had her fill of visiting in this lonely ranch country.

It was the afternoon of the program when things popped. The payoff began on the inside of the Cowpen schoolhouse. Della had been working day and night to get the kids ready to show off to their papas and mamas.

"Now, children," she said, "we'll try that song again."

Tommy Walker was about to obey, but seeing that Rufe Rasher wasn't going to do no more singing, he sat down and closed his mouth tight.

"We're waiting on you, Rufe," Della said patiently.

"Go ahead and wait," Rufe said boldly. "I ain't going to sing!"

Suddenly Della saw red. Her nerves had been on edge all day, anyway. She forgot she was a lady and didn't want to start trouble with her neighbors.

THE NEXT thing Rufe knew, he was lying face down across a desk and Della was licking the tar out of him with

a yardstick. When the stick broke, she continued to use the flat of her hand until Rufe thought he was turning into one big blister.

He yelled and bawled and begged. Tommy Walker just sat and stared at his fallen hero. Anybody who could make Rufe bawl like a baby was really something. Right then and there, he decided, he was through following in the footsteps of a no-good fourflusher like Rufe.

The moment Della turned Rufe loose, he made a run for the door. She let him go. The truth is, she felt too weak to follow him. Also, she was a little scared. No telling what his old man would do about this.

Rufe remembered that his pa had gone to town that day, so he tore out along the road for Cowpen Center. He knew that he could count on Whamdoodle to take his part against the teacher.

Charley had gone to town that afternoon, too. Since he had to help shift scenery that night, he figured he should get a haircut and look as good as possible, although his heart wasn't in it. The barber was just putting on the finishing touches when Whamdoodle happened to swagger in.

"Howdy, Carter," he said, an evil grin touching his big mouth. "Thought you might like to know I'm running cattle on the north range this spring."

That was when young Rufe found his pa.

"Pa," he blubbered, "that teacher liked to beat me to death! And I hadn't done a thing!"

"What?" Whamdoodle yelled. "You mean to say that Della Delaney laid a hand on you? Why, that dad-burned, educated little polecat! She can't beat no kid of mine without—"

Charley sat up straight in the barber chair, almost getting an ear cut off. For some reason, the hot blood seemed to be rushing through his head like a tornado out of the southwest.

"Better be careful what you say about Della!" he cut in harshly.

Whamdoodle spun around. "I say them Delaneys are a bunch of low-down coyotes! And Della's the worst of the lot. She's a—"

Charley never could remember exactly what happened next. But Ollie Ott, Deacon Fry and Banker Hopper, who were having a church finance meeting in the hardware store across the street, declared that Whamdoodle came sailing out of the barber shop like he'd been shot out of a cannon.

Whamdoodle put up the best scrap he knew how, but he would have been better off if he'd given up at the start. Charley really poured it on.

"When you've had enough," he panted, "just say that Della's the best teacher your ornery kid's ever had!"

"She's the best he ever had," Whamdoodle managed with bloody lips.

"Better send your kid back to school!" Charley said.

Rufe didn't wait to hear what his pa would say. He turned and raced back toward the schoolhouse as fast as he could run.

"I'm fed up with you pushing me around, too!" Charley said. "Get on your feet so's I can knock you down again!"

Whamdoodle didn't make no move to get back on his feet. He knew when he'd had enough.

Across the street, the church committee was feeling so good about the fight that they were slapping each other on the back and dancing in circles. They figured it was worth a thousand dollars of anybody's money to see Whamdoodle licked like that.

That night, the school program went off fine, and nobody ever heard anyone sing better than Rufe Rasher sang. But it was the last number on the program that made folks really sit up and take notice.

DELLA had borrowed old wedding dresses here and there and had dressed some of the girls in them. *Happy Memories of Long Ago,* she called this act, and the girls paraded across

the stage to soft music played by the preacher's wife. And the prettiest girl of all, dressed in her grandma's lovely old dress, was Della herself, with her hair hanging in soft curls to her shoulders and her glasses tucked away in a desk drawer out of sight.

Charley could hardly get his breath. This was the girl of his dreams, and he knew that no bun on the top of her head, or no horn-rimmed glases could ever side-track him again.

After the program, he took her home. He didn't talk about horses, cattle and coon hunting. In fact, he didn't talk at all. He just put his arms around her and let his actions speak for themselves. And when he kissed her, it wasn't on the cheek. And when he got through, she knew she'd been kissed.

You might as well know that the Professor arrived in Cowpen Center a few hours before the wedding. Uncle Clam, who went into the saloon for a bracer, found him wearing a new green checkered suit and playing the piano.

"Just the gent I'm looking for," Uncle Clam declared.

"Thought the preacher's wife always did the playing for weddings," the Professor grumbled as Clam dragged him toward the church.

"She's gone to a missionary meeting somewhere," Clam told him. "Seems the church board met t'other day and had such a good laugh about something that they voted to pay all her expenses."

And you might as well know that the Professor found his ring. He found it on Della's slim finger. But seeing how happy she was, he didn't say a word. Then when he learned that the widow had found the ring and sold it to Charley for enough to buy seed corn, he decided he ought to help her take care of the crops. Which suited the widow and little Tommy fine. Later, the money he'd saved came in handy for buying some pigs to fatten on the corn.

So if worries were rain, Cowpen Center would likely have turned into a desert. Charley, Della, Uncle Clam, the Preacher, the Professor, the Widow—no one you could think of had a thing to worry about. Unless it was Whamdoodle Rasher, who worried considerably that one of his cows might stray onto Bar C range.

But even in a desert, you can expect a little rain to fall once in awhile.

Coming in the Next Issue

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Captain Bob Pryor at His Best in

BADLANDS BREED

A Hard-Hitting Rio Kid Novel

By ROE RICHMOND

He confronted them as they carried the pole

The SHERIFF'S FRIEND

By W. LAMAR FLY

FRANK BERRYMAN lay on his stomach in the dry, reedy grass, propping himself up a little on his forearms so that the point of his sheriff's badge would not dig into his chest. A hundred feet ahead, the Mexican shack lay quiet and ominous, a dark island in the middle of a circular clearing filled with moonlight. On both sides he could hear the grunting, scuffling movements of his possemen as they closed in, and on the other side of the house he caught a glimpse of his new deputy, Brad Watson, scurrying up half-crouched to the protection of a giant oak tree.

It pays to have friends, he thought with satisfaction. Johnny Lewis had been his friend, as well as his deputy,

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Against this lynch-hungry mob Sheriff Frank Berryman needed a friend to side him, and he wasn't at all sure he had one

and it seemed right that his friends would exact vengeance from Johnny's killer. It had even been a Mexican friend who had brought the tip-off that Cortez would be here tonight. Yes, it paid to have friends; a man could get things done with their help.

Thumbing back the hammer of his gun, he tried to steady his nerves against the red surge of hate that he felt for Cortez when he thought of how senseless the killing had been. Johnny had been making an arrest for cattle theft. Cortez had killed the deputy to avoid a couple of years at Huntsville; and with the one murderous bullet he had made himself a desperate animal, to be hunted and tracked by a score of men who would ask nothing better than to find him over the sights of their guns.

Frank stood up boldly and strode into the clearing, confident that his advance was covered by the rifles of the posse. A vague uneasiness tore at him suddenly, which he analyzed as concern that the Mexican would be killed before he could get in his shot for Johnny.

"All right, Cortez," he shouted, cupping his hands over his mouth, "come on out. The house is covered from all sides."

A light went on almost at once, and Frank saw with satisfaction that the door of the shack was being opened slowly and cautiously. A knot of tense expectancy formed in his throat, and then dissolved as the thin, stooped figure of an old man appeared in the doorway, the kerosene lamp in his trembling hand revealing a droopy, white mustache and watery eyes that rolled wildly in terror. Someone sighed from outside the clearing, and a rifle hammer clicked back into the safety position.

"Buenas tardes papacito," said Frank, watching closely for movement in the room behind. "Where is Domingo Cortez?"

"He is not here." The old man spoke loudly and clearly for all his terror. "He came in late today and ate supper with me, and went to sleep in the cotton wagon in the field." He waved his hand vaguely toward the patch of cotton a hundred yards away.

A rustling behind the oak trees told Frank that searchers were already on the way to investigate. "Hell's fire," he heard someone mutter, "we passed right by the wagon coming in here."

A shadow flickered briefly in the room beyond the lamp, and pushing the old man ahead of him, he stepped into the shack, ducking quickly into the shadow at the side of the door. A ponderous, swarthy woman sat upright in the ancient bed, the yellow sheet clutched to her shoulders. The rest of the house was empty.

Back outside, he gathered what was left of the posse and started toward the cotton field. Halfway there, he met the other men returning, disgust showing plainly in their shambling walk and trailing rifles.

"He had been there, all right," said Bob Campbell, spitting into the dust. "Wagon's full of blankets, and change all over the ground where he jumped out. But he's halfway to Mexico by now. Let's go home."

THREE DAYS LATER, Berryman stood on the platform of the railroad station, waiting for the two o'clock train from Laredo. It was only one-thirty, and he had paced up and down the loose boards of the platform until he felt that he knew every nail in them. Settling his short, thick-set figure down on a convenient box, he took the telegram from his pocket and glanced through it for the tenth time. It was from the sheriff of Webb County, whom he remembered having met once at a peace officers' convention in San Antonio, and was dated the day before.

CORTEZ PICKED UP HERE IN LAREDO RETURNING TO YOU BY SPECIAL DEPUTY TWO O'CLOCK TRAIN SATURDAY

The train whistled its plaintive warning from far down the track, and Frank stood up to peer down toward the south

curve. As the engine ground to a stop before the little stallion, he loosened this pistol in its holster, thinking again of Johnny Lewis, wishing that he could have found Domingo Cortez running across the cotton field instead of having him handed over so formally and legally in the middle of the day on the streets of Candido.

The deputy and his prisoner were the first passengers off the tired day coach. Cortez was a small, wiry Mexican with long, black hair that flew out wildly from under a shabby felt hat. His eyes still held the frightened look of a hunted animal, although he was trying desperately to appear unconcerned as Frank approached. Looking at him, the sheriff was reminded of a deer he had once trapped in the narrow end of a box canyon, which had exhausted itself in an impossible attempt to climb the steep rocky wall and then had fallen to cropping grass with jerky, nervous movements as if there were nothing left but to ignore the situation.

The sheriff signed a receipt for the prisoner's delivery, directed the relieved deputy to Hogan's Cafe and Bar, and shoved Cortez toward the closed buggy which he had brought to the station. Back at the jail, he locked the Mexican in a cell on the second floor and returned to his office downstairs, to find Brad Watson waiting for him.

He sat down at the desk and lit a cigar, feeling the tension drain out of his body, Brad walked to the window and looked out, then turned and leaned toward Frank with his palms resting on the desk. He was a cleancut, good humored boy, still young enough to visualize romance and excitement in the life of a peace officer.

"Is he up there?" the deputy asked, jerking his head toward the upper floor of the jail.

"Locked up tighter than a drum," answered Frank. "You look worried. What's the trouble?"

"I heard Bob Campbell talking to some of the boys. They're talking mean. There's a whole gang of them down at Hogan's."

Frank felt the rich taste of the cigar turn bitter in his throat, as the tense anger toward Cortez returned. "Don't worry about it, kid." He looked up at the boy shrewdly. "Johnny Lewis was sure a good boy. I felt about him like I would about my own son. He was a good friend of yours, too."

Watching Brad, he saw a look of disbelief creep into the boy's eyes as he caught the implication of the words. What the hell, he thought, biting down savagely on the cigar, what does he expect me to do? Doesn't he know the Mex is headed for the noose anyhow? "Go on home," he said, rising and reaching for his hat on the corner of the desk; "I'll see you in the morning."

OUT ON THE dusty street, he threw the cigar away and walked briskly toward Hogan's, feeling the warm sun on his back. Glancing upward as he passed the jail, he could see Cortez' wild, black hair at the barred window as the Mexican stared down at him.

Frank looked through a doorway at a clock in one of the stores. It was a little after five now, but the square was still filled with wagons loaded with the week's provisions for the Saturday shoppers. He felt the nervous lump rise again in his throat as he noticed that there was no movement to pull out of the little town. The country kids were still playing on the schoolground slide, and the women were still packed into their tight little knots of conversation on the park benches. He stopped for a moment to light another cigar, then sauntered slowly down the main street, nodding casually to the groups of men who lounged against the store fronts.

Approaching Hogan's, he saw a man get up off the curb and turn quickly into the bar, and as he reached the door, he heard a loud voice break off suddenly in mid-sentence. A sharp combination of tobacco smoke and alcohol fumes bit into his lungs as he turned in, making

him hesitate for a moment, waiting for his eyes to adjust themselves to the hazy semi-darkness. In the middle of the irregular group of men around the counter, he saw the lean, blond head of Bob Campbell, and pushing his way to the bar, he noticed that Campbell turned a trifle too quickly to greet him, that his smile was a little too obvious, and that his outstretched hand was more formal than the usual greeting.

They aren't going to let me in on it, he realized, glancing down at the star on his chest. He waited for Bob to start the usual by-play over who would buy the drinks, and was surprised and uncomfortable when his friend ordered from Hogan and threw down a coin.

"Hogan's business is good today," said Frank, picking up his glass of beer.

"Yep." Bob looked around in a pretense at surveying the room. "Guess the boys are celebrating. They would have been mighty disappointed if Cortez had made it across the border."

Go on, keep talking, the sheriff thought, I'll play ball with you. I thought more of Johnny Lewis than any man here. But he finished the beer in idle talk, feeling the uneasy, sidelong glances from every side, and finally walked out again.

It was dusk, but he had lost his appetite. Back at the jail, he carried a plate of beans to Cortez' cell. The Mexican was lying on his back on the hard, narrow cot, staring up at the ceiling with his hands locked under the wild mat of hair. He turned his head as Frank peered in through the bars, and attempted a weak smile. The sheriff put down the tin plate in stony silence and went back to his office.

IT WAS ALMOST midnight when the mob surged up the street to the jail. Looking out from the second-story window, Frank saw them roll like a dark wave up to the heavy street door and then roll back a few steps as they found it closed and locked. By the light over the door, he could see that only a few of the men carried guns—probably only those who lived in town, he thought. The country people hadn't brought theirs in with them. In the front ranks of the pressing men, he could see the tall figure of Bob Campbell carrying the coiled rope with the hangman's noose already fashioned in one end.

He glanced across the narrow corridor into Cortez' cell. The Mexican had blown out his candle, and was standing pressed against the bars of the cell door, his head cocked to one side in an agonized attitude of listening to the shuffling sound of the men below, his breath rasping through clenched teeth.

He's not as brave now as when he pulled the trigger on Johnny Lewis, Frank thought bitterly, and wished that he had yielded to the temptation to leave the big door unlocked. If they had only taken him in on the plan, he would have done it, and the whole thing would have been done and over with.

Down below, the mob had fallen back outside the light. Suddenly, a dark figure was pushed out from the crowd; as it stumbled up to the big steel door, Frank saw that it was Jeb Andrews, the negro locksmith of Candido. A tide of anger welled up in the sheriff as he watched the man fumble his instruments from the pocket of his overalls. Jeb himself had been locked up in the jail last week for being drunk; he had no business fooling with the door.

Why must they do it this way, he asked himself bitterly. Jeb Andrews is no friend of mine, nor of theirs, nor of Johnny Lewis either. Johnny himself would not like it this way—and suddenly, seeing the dead boy's laughing face in his mind's eye, he knew that Johnny Lewis would not have liked this business anyway. Johnny had been a lot like Brad Watson—young, reckless, and daring—but still idealistic and deadly serious when it came to enforcing law.

He realized, then, why his friends had left him out of their plans for Cortez. They had respected his integrity more than they had counted on his

friendship for Johnny Lewis and for themselves. They could force Jeb Andrews to their will, but they had not dared to force Frank Berryman's loyalty to his office. He looked down at the metal star pinned to his shirt front with sudden pride and with a little wonder, as if he were seeing it there for the first time in a long while. It shone back at him in the moonlight, seeming almost to whisper a friendly promise of strength and support.

The sheriff's pistol shot was placed carefully six inches from Jeb Andrews' busy hand, and the negro was a good ten feet down the street before the echo of the blast had died away. The dark mass of men came into sudden motion, pressing back further into the protection of the night. Then a man stepped forward, carelessly swinging the rope with the noose at his side, his blond head turned up toward the window.

"We don't want to hurt you, Frank." Campbell was swaying a little, and his voice was thick. The sheriff wondered how many of his other friends in the mob had had to fire their courage with whiskey for this undertaking. "You're our friend, like Johnny was. But we want that damn Mexican."

"Cortez is in the hands of the law," Frank answered quietly from the window. "If you take him out of here, you'll have to kill me first." He felt easier now.

Campbell hesitated, and looked back toward the men in the street. A few figures detached themselves from the crowd and walked away in the direction of the square. Then Campbell walked back hurriedly, and Frank could see him conferring with a group who gathered around him in the darkness.

AGAIN Frank looked over at Cortez. The prisoner was on his knees, the wild mop of hair bent over a rosary hanging from his neck.

From the window, he saw part of the mob struggling with a telephone pole, and on a sudden impulse he ran down the stairs and out the big door, confronting the surprised men as they labored up with the pole between them.

"This door is county property," he said, cocking the hammer of the gun deliberately. "Drop that pole and go on home." He was closer to them now, close enough for them to see the determination in his eyes and hear it in his voice. Hogan was the nearest man to him, and he watched the fat cafeman's face as the expression of amazement faded into fear. He shifted the gun a little to point straight at Hogan's stomach. As the big man let go of the pole and stepped back, he could hear the other men grunt before they let their burden drop heavily to the ground. They stood there for a moment, looking at him belligerently in the lighted circle, then turned and walked away toward the square.

Turning, Frank saw that Bob Campbell was now the only man left in front of the jail. "This has been a lot of trouble, Bob," he said, holstering the gun. "You owe me the drinks tomorrow."

The blond man's eyes were hard and bitter, and he threw the noose to the ground violently. "I thought you and Johnny were pals," he said harshly. "I thought you and I were friends too. All right—just wait until election day comes around!"

"You know how I felt about Johnny," said Frank evenly. "I know, too, that you helped me get this job. In fact, I only have one better friend than you. This is it." He touched his badge.

Campbell watched the gesture uncomprehendingly. "Have it your way," he said. But the bitterness faded out of his eyes, and he stooped to retrieve the rope, slung it carelessly over one shoulder, and turned toward the square. At the edge of the light, he stopped.

"Come to think of it," he said, "I'd say the drinks are on you. You're the maverick that caused all the trouble." His grin held a little sheepishness and quite a lot of respect as he turned again in the direction of Hogan's. • • •

MONTANA SHOWDOWN

A Novelet

By TOM ROAN

Phil was the last of the fighting Channings, and there were but two choices left him — run, or fight the father of the girl he loved

CHAPTER I

Trouble in Tombstone River

A BREATHLESS quiet held the town, with the lowering August sun bright and blinding as it slanted across the valley from the distant dark humps and peaks that was the Squaw Tit Range in the west. No noise came from the river curving sharply through a deep, rockwalled chasm under the old wagon bridge at the foot of the street. In the long drought holding since an early dry spring it had ceased to be a river, dwindling away in the long, hot Montana summer to a creek where in places the water was only a couple or

One of the bullets lifted the man and rocked him from the roof

three wide steps across.

Trouble was coming. Blood would be spilled. The whole town of Tombstone River seemed to have heard about it as if the news had spread to every house in town.

It had been a quiet Saturday afternoon at best. Now it seemed as if a funeral pall had gripped the town with its long main street and warped board sidewalks. The hush of waiting stretched from the old stone jail in the cotton woods beyond the wagon bridge to the squat black water tank on

a tall butte where a dusty trail forked.

Horses had disappeared from hitch-racks, their riders hurriedly quitting town or getting the animals to safety behind the false-fronted buildings. Three buckboards in front of the general store on the east side of the street just below the Saddle Tramp Saloon had gone grinding out of town with only half the supplies their owners had come in to buy.

Tombstone River had waited many times before for roaring guns and spilled blood. But never had it been more quiet and tense and fully expectant than now. As far as anybody knew there was only one real fighting man to be killed here today. The old wagon driver who had come with him would fight only if backed into a corner and with no other way out. With half a chance the old fellow was more likely to run for it on his crooked wooden peg-leg, with sense enough to flee the odds stacked against any Devil Drum Basin rider here this warm afternoon.

INSIDE the Rocky Mountain Saloon just across the street from the Saddle Tramp, the voice of white-haired old Bat Wingate was low and nervous.

"Once more I sound my warning, boys. You never send a Channing word you're going to kill him. You never buck right up in his face, him knowing you're coming. Damn it" —big, saddle-colored hands tightened on the beer taps of the long split-log bar— "you just don't take a Channing from the front! Hell, you take him from behind, him not knowing you're there until the gun goes off. Then, if you ain't made a last mistake in your life and missed, he falls dead."

"It's minutes after four now." A man's quick, half-wild eyes looked up at the dusty, spider-webbed clock on top of the back bar, his tongue trying to moisten dry, bloodless lips that trembled. "He had his warning in plenty of time, damn him!"

"Which—the large, raw-boned Wingate nodded—"is where the big, mean old horsefly is most apt to lie in your honey. Just once more I say you don't warn a Channing. You kill fast and sure, and not in front, and if you don't at the first shot he'll kill you."

For more than an hour, one breathless quiet spell after another had gripped the long, wide old room with its dust and smoke-darkened log beams and hard-packed earthern floor. Seven Rattleweed Canyon riders were in front of the bar, the last drinks they'd ordered standing untouched before them. The eyes of the most of them were staring straight ahead, faces drawn, thoughts planting a great fear in them.

Behind the bar, Wingate had been trying to hold them, with his low-voiced warnings. By rising on his toes now and then and turning his head he could look out over the short blue swinging doors and across the dust-dry street.

A death trap had been set and was waiting, one cowardly enough to rouse the whole town and surrounding ranges against these Rattleweed riders, but none of them could see it through the fumes of whisky fogging their brains. Eleven Rattleweed Canyon men had come galloping into town about noon, returning from a four-day trail-drive with five hundred head of cattle to the railroad shipping pens in Medicine Pass, forty miles to the southward. Still half-drunk from a spree in Medicine Pass, they had finished it here with their horses behind the saloon while they seemed to be trying to drink the Rocky Mountain dry.

"Good fighting men as you are, I'd say wait." Wingate was trying to put softness in his voice, talking to them in that low tone as a man would when handling dangerous horses. "Seems to me you fellers ain't been picked out yet to start the kick-off of the final blood-letting everybody knows must come between the Rattleweed and the Devil Drum. Dan Roundtree may raise a lot of hell about it, boys."

"We only ride for Dan Roundtree, Bat. He don't own us!"

"That I know." The old man nodded. "But ag'in I'd say wait. It ain't the place to take him. No, it ain't, boys."

It was hard to hold men back from doing something a carefully planning man had long wanted them to do. Even so short a period as a month ago the death of Phil Channing at any old time would have brought them pleasure. But certainly Tombstone River today was not the place for such a killing. Channing, usually a quiet, easy-going young fellow had just too damn many friends in this town, some of them men and women who had known his mother, his father and grandfather. None of them would want to see the last of the Channings murdered right out there on the street without a chance to put up some kind of fight for his life.

BIG DAN ROUNDTREE of the Rattleweed had given these men no orders to make trouble here in town. With something floating around inside his head that for years had been a hard-held secret, Roundtree still had sense enough to know the danger of getting the entire Tombstone River Valley up in arms against him.

It had long been known that he was doing all in his power to take over the rich water and grasslands in Devil Drum. Some of the rougher element had declared he had gone so far as to try to use his own daughter's beauty to help him.

None knew the untruth of that whispered talk better than Bat Wingate. Fact being fact, Ann Roundtree was one of the most beautiful women in Montana, but her charms were not for barter. They could have been Phil Channing's freely if the two were ever let alone and allowed to get together again.

Ann would never sell the last of the Channings down the river. If everything was not handled exactly right she would be likely to drag a hangman's rope across several trails—maybe her own father's along with others—if the one she had loved from childhood should be murdered like a dog here in town.

These fools here only had to wait for the end of this day and the coming night. But Wingate did not dare tell them what he knew. A man rammed his neck straight into a rope halter when he confided in a bunch of loud-mouthed drunks and bullies like this. What he did know was that long before this time tomorrow they would be aware that a tremendous move had come at last, that even now it was beginning out of town where guns could blaze without drawing swarming crowds of pop-eyed people. And the news tomorrow would rock the valley with excitement and speculation from the high arms of Bugle Peaks eighty miles north of town to Medicine Pass.

But talk was useless here, and had been only a waste of breath for a man who could not come right out and bluntly tell them things. No one who would dare talk had ever been able to connect Bat Wingate directly to many troubles between Rattleweed Canyon and Devil Drum Basin.

Four of the Rattlweeders had already disappeared from the original number of riders at the bar. Big Dink Pool, a six-foot, dark-bearded man of forty-odd in dingy black, had wiped his lips fifteen minutes ago, and had turned to the narrow stairway, going up the steps two at a time to the second floor.

Chide McGarvey, a pot-bellied little man with a drooping black mustache, had been the next to go. Always quiet, he had simply sauntered away without saying a word, getting his chance to drop unseen out the back door—a deadly man who was often the lone wolf when he killed.

Dude Free, a long, lean man of forty in shining black, had taken his walk, thrusting his six-shooters forward on his belt, face grim. Behind him had trailed Hans Van Dyne, more often called the Fighting Dutchman, a short, pug-nosed blond man of uncertain age that could be guessed as anywhere from

forty to fifty.

The loud-mouth of the lot was still at the head of the bar. A dark-haired, gray-eyed bull of a man, right now he was silent, apparently thoughtful. He stood like a dazed bull, staring straight ahead, now and then licking and biting his lips. Gault McQueen, the self-picked man to head the show, had been bragging and heavy-voiced up to fifteen minutes ago. Now he seemed stricken by dread. As Wingate glanced at him, the man's lips were tightening, slacking. His drink, a double-header like the seventh or eighth before it, was still waiting for him.

A HISS from the stairs seemed to stiffen every muscle and joint in his body, throwing a quick start through him.

"He's on the porch of the general store!"

"Damn him!" McQueen pawed for his glass, lifting it, gulping his drink. With a snarl he banged the glass back to the bar, glowering at Wingate. "Fill it!"

"As you say, Gault." Wingate moved forward with a bottle, philosophic resignation in his face. "To the brim again, I reckon?"

"Yeah, to the brim! McQueen's arm seemed stiffened in a cramp as he lifted his hand to swipe it across his lips. "Put some side boards on it if you can." He tried to grin, but it was more like a sneer. "I like my whisky like my fights—big, by hell, and stout."

"All right, Gault!" Another call turned heads toward the stairway. The man up there was bobbing back and forth. "He's left the porch and is coming up the street!"

"Wait, Gault!" Wingate was making just one more try. "I'm your friend, and you know it. If go you must, maybe it'll be better to do your shooting first, then finish this one."

"Damn that!" The drink went up, went down the wide maw of the man's mouth. The glass banged again as it came down. "Fill it! I'll drink her down when I come back!"

"Good luck, Gault!" The voice came from the stairs a final time, the eyes of the speaker glaring with excitement. "The others are already out there to back your play! They're only waiting for you."

CHAPTER II

The Last Channing

TURNING from the bar, Gault McQueen squared his big, lumpy shoulders, tightened his lips. His big hands sawed downward to the black butts of his long six-shooters. Trying to be showy even when far too drunk to fight, he made his rush, startling every man in the room with his unearthly yelling as he lunged through the swinging doors which flapped and wailed on their rusty hinges.

His cry outside was a despairing wail itself.

"Reach and pull!"

Wingate, eyes popping in his gaunt, white face was looking up at the clock.

"And never a Channing," he whispered, "who wouldn't reach when called on."

The thundering roar of a six-shooter filled the street, the concussion heavy enough even inside the Rocky Mountain to bring a musical little shivering and tinkling to glassware vibrating on the back bar.

Only a few minutes before, old peg-legged Rice Jackson, tears in his eyes and arms lifted pleadingly, had been standing in the middle of the floor in Spring & Tulley's General Store, begging desperately:

"For God's sake, Phil, don't go! It's murder! God knows they'll only kill you!"

"Stay where you are and do as I say." Phil Channing's lean face had been like granite. "After all these years the final showdown must come, though I haven't wanted it, as everybody knows. Don't follow me. I don't want to have to try to look after you and myself at the same time."

Knowing that Jackson was no fighting man, that he would only be killed the first thing, Phil had shoved his old driver aside, walking out on the porch

EPITAPH FOR ONE WHO FIZZED OUT

Here's to the soul of a pioneer,
Who made the boys blow their top—
"What'll you have to drink?" they asked,
And he answered. "Soda pop!"

—Pecos Pete

and standing there waiting. He meant to give the Rattleweed killers their chance if they wanted to take it. Then slowly he had come on down the steps and quietly headed up the street.

He had passed the mouth of the little alley between the general store and the Saddle Tramp, and had just come to the lopsided old rain barrel at the corner of the saloon when the swinging doors across the street crashed open with a sound like gun shots.

It was exactly eight minutes after four when Gault McQueen hit the sidewalk in front of the Rocky Mountain. Swinging doors yet flapping behind him, a bellowing bull and yelling maniac rolled into one, McQueen's six-shooters filled the street with a double-thundering roar.

It was Gault McQueen's usual method. Other men had seen him come like that, all yell and bellowing, to startle his intended victim and have him half-beaten before the first shot could be fired. He was wilder now than ever before, a glassy-eyed beast who had opened fire at the man beside the rain barrel the moment he was through the flapping barroom doors.

Both his bullets were a foot-wide of their target, but it was the end as far as Gault McQueen was concerned. Before he could fire again two mushrooming .44 balls had torn through his big, baggy belly, making small black dots in the skin where they entered, and big, gaping holes where they came out at the rear.

Eyes popping with surprise, his hat flying off, McQueen stumbled, and rocked drunkenly to a halt. A look of awe took the place of the drunken snarl on his bumpy red face. Suddenly sick at his stomach, big hands slapped to his midsection, he let the six-shooters drop, to bounce on the thick planks under his booted and spurred feet.

IN A SLOW tumble, he started his fall, beginning to pitch forward to land on his face. But it was not quite the end. Before the big man's nose could strike the sidewalk another report filled the warm air—the noise like quick thunder clapping between the high false fronts of stores and saloons.

As if that third shot had been fired by a man filled with hate and terrific fury, the bullet caught the falling man in the forehead at the hair-line, ripping all the way through and out the back to bury itself in the jamb of the doorway behind him.

With one would-be killer down Phil Channing still stood leaning against the rain barrel, a damnably cool and quiet figure in gray, a dead cigarette drooping

from the corner of a lip of his lean face that seemed to have aged before its time. The eyes held the cold glint of frosty blue glass, in spite of the late-August heat. A six-shooter was still in each hand, his thumbs wrapped like gripping steel over the hammers.

Phil Channing was waiting for the rest of it, and a wait for sudden bloody death was never long in times like these in Tombstone River. Two more half-drunken, lurching figures were already coming on, each bobbing from the rear of the narrow alleys flanking the Rocky Mountain.

The man who leaped out of the upper alley was Dude Free, reputed to be a fearless fighting man, but pasty-faced right now. Probably a last-moment streak of common sense had flashed through the whisky fog in his brain to make him realize what he was up against

The man coming from the lower alley was Hans Van Dyne. He was a breath slower than Free in getting into it.

The six-shooter in Free's right hand was already up and cocked. He sent a bullet crashing into the jamb of the door yards to the left of Channing's shoulder. With an oath he whipped up his six-shooter for a second shot.

But the first was Dude Free's one and only shot. Before he could finish his swing a bullet had torn through him heart-high, turning him on his heel. He came down in the mouth of the alley like a spinning figure on ice—the last fall and the last fight for the tall Missourian.

Hans Van Dyne must have frozen all at once to the entrance to the alley. A pinch of sense could also have come into his head. He had stopped with a jerk, eyes wide, with a wild blue light that marked his terror. Unable to back down after coming this far, his right hand was up, a cocked six-shooter filling it.

Again it was a killer's last bid to commit murder. Before Van Dyne could bring his weapon down and fire two fast shots had torn holes through him. Grunting and gasping as he loudly sucked in a deep breath, his six-shooter blazed harmlessly in the air, the bullet going high over the roofs across the street. Like a squatty shape of inflated rubber collapsing, he slumped helplessly on the hard-packed ground, a stream of red spouting from his nose and mouth. He coughed just once, made one spasmodic twist, and it was the end of the Fighting Dutchman.

Chide McGarvey might have made it if a tall, white-goateed old ghost who had been unnoticed in the fight had not outsmarted him. Always the sneak-killer, McGarvey never took an open chance. Having slipped away from the drinking and boasting gang in the Rocky Mountain, he had gone out the back door, quietly making his way up an old outside stairway to the loftlike second floor of the saloon, then up through a skylight to the wide-sprawling roof above the low false front.

In McGarvey's hands was a stubby-nosed carbine, a weapon he had taken from the saddle of his horse behind the saloon. Big hat off and dropped beside him, he was white-faced and bug-eyed as his head came up from behind the wide false front, the deadly little saddle gun snaking forward.

BUT before he could swing his weapon downward sudden disaster marked the end of him as if he had been the victim of a bolt of lightning. Another thundering report had filled the town, the noise heavy enough to rattle every loose window pane along both sides of the street. A big old double-barreled gun on the roof of the Saddle Tramp had suddenly joined the fight.

Caught in the face by the first roaring charge of buckshot, it was a headless figure now on the roof of the Rocky Mountain, the reflex action of muscles thrusting him on up until a man with bloody arms and shoulders stood there, his carbine dropping on over the false front to clatter on the sidewalk thirty feet below.

McGarvey started his pitch right be-

hind the dropping of the gun, a headless thing coming on and over the wall of planking. At the instant he tilted downward the shotgun blazed its second charge from across the street with deafening noise. The full charge of buck caught the falling man in the air, splitting his shoulders apart. With a blood-splashing thump the would-be killer landed beside the body of Gault McQueen.

"Up and at us, if you dare ag'in!"

The old ghost in blue was suddenly on his feet on the roof of the Saddle Tramp. In his lean hands was the long shotgun, reloaded and ready to let go with another thundering charge that would drop a bull-elephant in its tracks.

"Let's hear your pistols shoot!" he squawked.

There was no answer, and none coming. Few were the professional fighting men who wanted to face old Badger Cobey with merely a six-shooter or a ten-inch blade in his hand. Only a fool would have dared brace him now, up there with his deadly weapon and unerring pale-gray eyes under his shaggy white brows, a man, folks said, who had learned his fighting from the cradle to hell and back.

Phil Channing, the last of the Channings, stood down below, looking like the coolest man in town at the moment. To his left, and a thousand yards on down the valley beyond the jail, clouds of dust were rising. Like silvery umbrellas they were puffing open in the slanting sunshine, one hanging and widening behind the other until they became a single banner more than two miles long, broadening and lazily curling in the still air.

Help Fight TB

Buy Xmas Seals

CHAPTER III

War in Bloom

REGARDLESS of orders to stay away from Tombstone River, ten more of Phil Channing's Devil Drum Basin riders were coming, a rifle glinting across the lap of every man, a belt-gun rocking at each hip. All eyes on the town ahead of them, their dead-sober faces were hard and full of fight.

Damnation was in the making for Tombstone River today if those fighting hellions coming at wild gallop were not stopped before more guns started their roaring. A good half of the tough riders in that gang were outlaws, wanted somewhere, as was old Badger Cobey, the one-time Oklahoma and Southwest badman, now foreman of Channing's Devil Drum outfit, who had so suddenly and unexpectedly appeared with his ripping fire and death up on the roof of the Saddle Tramp.

Badger, as well as Phil Channing's other riders, had been ordered to remain in Devil Drum Basin twelve miles to the southwest when the owner of the outfit had come to town. It was not often that the old man took the bit in his teeth like this—and knowing well enough that all the others would follow his example. But for days now there had been whispers going the rounds that trouble between Devil Drum Basin and Rattleweed Canyon was again about to break out, and all the Channing riders knew it. So they were coming, not to be held back any longer—and red hell was boiling and about to blow the lid.

In the Rocky Mountain the quiet was so breathless it was sickening. Untouched drinks still stood on the bar, the men in front of the counter only

staring, their faces grim and tense.

Bat Wingate again stood with his hands gripped to the beer taps, as motionless as iron. He was on his toes, his head turned, his stare fixed. As if never going to move he was looking out through the opening above the swinging doors and on across the street still streaked with arrows of gunsmoke.

By looking out through the opening under the doors all the men there could see Gault McQueen's booted feet and legs to the knees—lifeless now, that clubs and stilts had made their last charge for their bull-bellowing, bull-rushing owner. Smeared on the boards to the left of the dead legs was the bloody, shapeless thing that had been Chide McGarvey.

"It would seem"—Wingate cleared his throat with a raspy sound—"that the boys didn't make it. Damn it, I was afraid they wouldn't!"

"Gawd, look!" A squint-eyed cowboy had dropped to a squat to get a wider view under the front doors. "McGarvey—McGarvey, now, looks like he's lost the whole damn head clean hell off his shoulders!"

"And your Devil Drum Basin man is still standing on his feet, boys." Wingate turned his head on his long neck, eyes looking searchingly into the tensed, white faces at the bar. "Quiet and peaceful-like, which seems a part of his breed. Just standing smiling and polite-looking, as purring tigers when they kill you. Me, now"—again he cleared his throat—"I've always said that any of them damn Channings will fool you—and Phil quicker'n even his daddy and granddaddy before him. Men who put them two fellers down was just smart enough to do it from the bushes. Good reason for it. Them two—Fighting Bill and Roaring Sam—was the fastest and coolest fighting men I ever saw until Phil Channing come along."

No one answered him. Set white faces only stared, here and there a quick tongue lashing like a blade to lick dry lips.

BIG BUCK YARDLEY was the first to move. A reddish hand pawed forward, a balled fist pressed hard against the top of the bar to steady itself as it slid the glass of whisky nearer. Fingers closed around the glass. Quickly the hand lifted the drink, the wide red mouth opening as the glass came up, the whisky slopping down in a gulp. With an oath the big man lowered the hand.

"His luck can't last always! Takes only one bullet to break it!"

"Just what Gault said." Wingate nodded. "Words, anyhow, to that effect."

"And seems like you sort of like Channing's style, Wingate!" Grady Grover, a short, dish-faced man with popping brown eyes answered him. "Maybe it sort of pleased you to see them Rattleweeders die in front of your door!"

"Not pleased a-tall, Grady." The old saloonkeeper looked down, meeting the glaring brown eyes unflinchingly. "Gault owes me more'n four hundred dollars. Almost the same goes for Dude. The Dutchman was so cheap he never bought nothing if he could help it. The going of Dude and Gault only costs me the hopes of one day collecting the money they owe me."

"True enough, maybe." Grover was still glaring. "But it seems to me—"

"Let Bat give me another drink, and shut your mouth, Grady!" Yardley picked up his glass, big fist swallowing it as he banged it on the top of the bar. "I'm dry!"

Now Dink Pool was hurrying down the narrow stairway behind them. His dark hair was a wild mop, his face yellow with excitement.

"Gimme a drink!" he snarled, lunging up to the bar like a man who had just met the devil and had managed to outrun him. "Double-header! The boys didn't make it—none of 'em! That damn feller don't aim when he shoots. He just drops a gun in line and let the hammer fall, and whoever he's got his eye on falls with the hammer!"

"Bottoms up, everybody." Wingate

wiggled his hands at the untouched drinks, and reached in back for a bottle and a taller glass. "Next round's on the house."

"Then we get out of here, fast!" Pool looked toward the front doorway. "I took a look down the valley from upstairs. Looks like the whole damn Devil Drum Basin's hitting town. Good thing our horses are out back. Best thing for right now, I guess, is just to sort of cool down and wait for a better chance."

"And that, Dink, makes sense." Wingate was filling a tall glass to the brim with hundred-proof Yellow Jack. "As I've said, you don't kill a Channing from the front. A Channing goes best when you take him from a quiet place, 'way out of town with a good hole to duck into in case you miss your shot—You boys drinking the same, are you?"

"Damn the drink for me!" Yardley slapped the bar. "Hand me a bottle, and charge it! Hell!" He banged the bar again. "Hand me two bottles! We're getting out of here fast!"

"Why—why, sure." Wingate stood the bottles on the bar. "But you surely won't be going without picking up your own dead Rattleweed riders, Buck? Back in the old days even the meanest Indians didn't do that when—"

"Damn the Indians!" Yardley grabbed the bottles. "I make only forty bucks and grub a month at the Rattleweed, just like everybody else. I ain't drawing no gunman wages. Old Dan Roundtree can come and get 'em—if he wants 'em! Let's go, boys!"

A BOASTFUL leader of men only a short time ago, he was again leading, but not boasting—and this time straight out the back door to the waiting horses behind the saloon.

As they filed out Wingate watched them with narrowing eyes, contempt in them.

"Damn jugheads!" His voice was a low murmur when the last man was gone, racing for his saddle. "Blowhards, every damn one of 'em! But just wait'll they get to the Rattleweed and tell the news. With what's happened here, and"—he turned and looked up at the clock—"what should have started out near the Rattleweed about three-thirty, she'll be all over but the shouting by midnight." He turned to a lower shelf under the back bar. "For that I'll have me a good drink of my private stock. Being smart so far, maybe I'd better go right on being smart."

Glass of whisky in hand a moment later, he stared at himself in the grime-streaked, bullet-punctured mirror on the back bar.

"Guess I'll close early," he decided, "and take myself a quiet little ride out there just after dark to see the final guns go off. The last of the Channings—and the last of the damn Roundtrees, too, I got a notion."

He was suddenly grinning. "And won't folks hereabouts be mad as hell when they find out I've got a brother with a big sheep outfit in Wyoming who'll just be tickled clear out of his red flannel drawers when I let him know he can move in with about ten whopping big flocks of bleating woolies to graze on Rattleweed and Devil Drum grass?"

He lifted his glass. "Here's to a quick little war in bloom. Started in a single afternoon, and, by hell, finished the same night!"

He downed his smooth old private stock.

CHAPTER IV

Peace in Tombstone River

PHIL CHANNING, having recognized Badger Cobey's yell up on the roof, knew now that the old foreman had sneaked into town and had kept out of sight until he could get to the roof of the Saddle Tramp.

As always, Channing had hated the

thought of a fight. He had not asked for it today, and would have avoided it if it had been possible. In fifteen or twenty minutes more he would have been quietly heading back down the valley on his tall bay beside the wagon loaded with a month's supplies, and with old Rice Jackson driving the two big, strong black horses. The wagon, not completely loaded was still standing behind the general store.

But a man could not run from a gang of bullies when they sent him word to get out of town by a certain time, or else. If a fellow ran once he would be expected to run the next time he had to meet them. And the whole town knew of that challenge because Pete Gains, a one-armed little town busybody had brought him the message, blurting it out in the general store before everybody after Channing had been in Tombstone River only a little more than an hour.

"They're after your hide, Channing!" the little man had announced gleefully. "They gimme a dollar to come tell you. By four o'clock they say you'd better be cleared out of Tombstone River complete. If you ain't gone they're going to get you. There's eleven of 'em agin you and old man Jackson, and you won't have a chance."

"Go back and tell them," Channing had said, handing him another dollar, feeling sudden anger to the marrow of his bones, "that I'm not going to leave Tombstone River until I'm damned good and ready."

Now the clash had come, it was over, and he had downed the men who had tried to kill him. But it was not all over, even though he heard horses storming away from the rear of the Rocky Mountain Saloon, beating across the long bend of the river bank out over the rim-rocked flat. For the Devil Drum riders were here—just below the jail—and would soon be hammering across the wagon bridge. And not yet had there been any sign of sheriff Hank Butcher popping his big red nose into it.

"They're done for Phil." Badger Cobey announced, as he stepped out of the alley, long choke-bored double-barrel on the crook of his arm, a pair of well-worn six-shooters dangling at his hips. "And I don't wanta hear a damn word about my sneaking into town behind you, though. I don't like the boys coming myself. If I hadn't been up on the Saddle Tramp roof, though, Chide McGarvey might of got you, marking the end I so often warn you about unless we up and wipe out every livin' thing that looks like a Rattleweeder."

"What really brought you to town, Badger!"

"Something I heard less'n an hour after you left the basin." Cobey glanced right and left, lowering his voice. "One of the Indians in the basin heard that things was going to happen today. Old Tomahawk Charley, it was. He never misses, always knows thing others don't see or hear. More about it later if he can have a little time to work on it. We'd better travel quick as we can, now that most of the damn basin's almost deserted by them fools coming."

Tombstone River was still shocked into helpless silence. The dead across the street lay where they had dropped, the blood pooling around them and with more fighting men storming into town nobody would risk their ire by showing an interest in the dead.

THE RIDERS hit the bridge, hoofs making a reverberating thunder on the planking. In Tombstone River all doors along the street were closed. With a nod for Cobey to keep an eye on the Rocky Mountain, Channing turned toward the incoming riders, lifting his hand as they started pulling up in a mob, their horses rearing, dust swirling around them.

Orders were short. There was no need of asking them why they had come.

"Stick to your saddles! You're a little too late, boys! Sit where you are, and keep your mouths shut. The big show's over. You'll hear about it later. Don't ask questions!"

"Which is best, yeah!" Cobey cocked a mean old eye on the bunch. "Set where you are, and no fool play or gab. Wise heads don't leak at the mouth."

Rice Jackson peg-legged forward in the dust. "The wagon's ready, Phil! She'll roll with everything we wanted aboard, and with us leaving peace in Tombstone River, maybe, when we're gone."

"Then we'll roll *now!*"

"Hell, wait, Phil!" Smith Kenney, a tall, hook-nosed rider in dusty gray shot up his right hand. "Don't we get one little chance to stretch our legs and have just a few drinks before—"

"There's whisky on the wagon!" Rice Jackson cut him short, glowering up through the dust. "You hang around and start drinking here, and the next thing you know you'll be hollering for ice water in hell!"

"And anyhow, Smith" —Cobey snorted dust from his thin old nose— "Phil's already said what's what. There ain't to be any back-talk. Trail and follow!"

Some foremen would have had trouble with them. The tough old Cobey rarely had any use for arguments. He was too often right, seldom bothering to stop and explain the reason for this and that, especially when time was limited.

Disappointed and sullen, the outfit followed them to the wagon behind the general store. Cobey's tall roan had been left behind a small storehouse not far away, and in less than ten minutes the outfit was stringing away, Channing in the lead as they headed for the bridge.

Watching like an old hawk, Cobey spurred up and fell in at Channing's left, shotgun bobbing on one side of his saddle a slender-barreled high-power rifle on the other. The others trailed behind the wagon, gloomy and silent.

Tombstone River still held to its stunned silence until the wagon was beyond the jail. Then the entire town seemed to spring alive—at first only a few who screwed up enough courage to venture out in the street, then others, until soon the street was filled, everybody hurrying to make a jamming mob in front of the Rocky Mountain. Cobey grinned when he looked back. When he spoke, his voice was low, almost guarded, force of habit.

"Like gophers hopping from their holes after a grizzly's just gone through on its way. I'd give my good luck silver peso just to hear what they're saying back there right now."

"I wonder what happened to Hank Butcher." Channing glanced back at the jail. "Or Ira Ward, his ever-dashing deputy!"

"Out somewheres, supposed to be on a dangerous job, I reckon." Cobey bared his snags in a grin. "Must of got wind of things going to pop. It could be that both are hiding back there in the jail, like they've been known to do when hell blows the lid in Tombstone. Hank and Ira have got their foreparts just wadded hell-full of guts, but the baldness for the want of hair on their bellies and the lack of sand in what's known as craws is the most amazing things about 'em."

CHANNING nodded, face still grim. "All right. But I'm asking you again what brought you to Tombstone when you were supposed to stay away? What did Tomahawk Charley tell you?"

"Something big is going to happen today." The old outlaw's voice dropped still lower. "Some of our friends back there must of got wind of it—whatever it is. Charley couldn't tell me what it was. He got it from Buckskin Johnny, the half-breed Crow we run out of the basin about a year ago when we found him forking a stolen horse. Buckskin, as you likely know, now rides for the Rattleweed. I don't trust him too far, but even a sorry spy in your enemy's camp is better'n none."

"Maybe"—Channing frowned,— "Buckskin meant only this gun mess we've just come through."

"Something tells me," declared the old man, "that it's a damn sight bigger and

meaner'n that. Them coyotes back in town, I think, just saw a quick chance to kill you off and get it done, making a big reputation for 'emselves at the same time. —Say, listen! After we get another mile or two from town maybe you and me had better string on ahead and let the others follow with the wagon. I'll give Rice the nod to pass a couple of bottles of whisky back among 'em to keep 'em peaceful, though they won't go back on my orders twice in one day. Suit you, Phil?"

Channing merely nodded, staring at the country ahead. The trouble in town still rankled, making him grim and thoughtful. Killing a man was no pleasure. Yet he had had to do it. Whisky could sometimes do things to men that rabies would do to a dog, making them slobbering-mad, and there had been altogether too many of them who were determined to fight. It was beginning to look to Phil Channing as if blood and gunsmoke were his heritage and doomed to die in battle in spite of all he could do.

CHAPTER V

Death Blocks the Trail

ALL THE real trouble Devil Drum Basin spread had ever known had come from the Rattleweed Canyon outfit, and it seemed destined to go on and on until one side or the other was beaten completely.

Rattleweed grass land joined the Devil Drum holdings just north of the basin. The deep and wide main Rattleweed Canyon ran for miles back into the lofty humps of the Squaw Tit Range. Its smaller canyons, basins and gorges made a many-fingered hand thrust far into the mountains, all of them well-watered and choked with grass. Thrown together, every cattleman admitted that the Rattleweed and the Devil Drum would make the greatest cattle and horse heaven west of the Missouri River.

Big, red-headed Dan Roundtree had come north with his big Texas herd in the early Eighties. First to arrive he had had free choice of the fine lands, and no one to think of disputing his claim. Fighting Bill Channing and his son Roaring Sam, had come two years later with six big wagons and eight hundred head of longhorns.

At the time the Channings had come no one wanted the wild and—in places—fearful-looking Devil Drum Basin. In those days it had been only a hide-away for renegade Indians and white outlaws. Backed by the guns of Badger Cobey even then, for already his outlaw days were back of him and he had thrown in his lot with the Channings as foreman, they had fought their way in spite of all warnings that they were only pouring their cattle and horses into hell's own sink-hole for them to vanish from the face of the earth.

Three years after they had settled in Devil Drum Basin men were looking with envious eyes at the rangeland paradise the Channings had fought for and won for themselves against innumerable odds. The indomitable Fighting Bill and Cobey had made peace with the most of the hide-out Indians and whites. Relentless men with a single purpose in mind, they had killed or banished those who had refused an offering of peace. But, hard and fair men from beginning to end, they had protected the rest, using them as hired hands at regular wages as long as they wanted to stay on the straight and narrow, minding their own business and letting the outside world alone.

Most men said that young Phil Channing had good reason to hate the country. At the age of five he had seen his mother and his grandfather die in a buckboard while he sat in the body of the vehicle behind them late one afternoon. Rifle bullets had torn through them from a brush-fringed rim of a

ravine two hundred yards away, and no one had ever been able to name the hidden killer.

At fifteen, the same Phil Channing and Badger Cobey had buried the bullet-riddled body of Phil's father, Roaring Sam, among the twenty-odd graves under the tall old cottonwoods and willows behind the rambling ranch house of log and stone a mile inside the mouth of the basin. From fifteen on to twenty-six now, Cobey had been schooling Phil in all the fighting tricks he knew, and only, it seemed, for the day he would have to go down in smoke, the last of the Channings making his last stand.

Dan Roundtree had been the surprise none of them would ever forget. He had been a bosom friend of the Channing family until eighteen or twenty years ago, a brawny man who might have whipped a mountain lion. Something had started him to drinking steadily after a fight during a wild spree in the Rocky Mountain. A bullet glancing on his head and three more in his arms and legs had put him in bed six weeks.

After that he had been a surly man, taking up with strange characters, sometimes gambling and losing staggering sums, and generally shunning old friends until none of the staunch and true ones were left to him.

"Watch 'im," had been Badger Cobey's warning all along, becoming more emphatic as the years passed. "He was once our best friend, but he's getting so he hates everybody. You ask me I'd say that even includes his own daughter. More every day."

NOW, having galloped on ahead of the wagon as soon as Tombstone River was out of sight behind them an hour later Channing and the old man were mounting the last high ridge. Timber and rocks were here, the trail twisting. Both were alert in their saddles, each with a rifle across his lap, each with eyes raking glances at the ragged spurs of the pass above them while alertly they watched the rough slopes.

"There, now!" Cobey lifted his hand to point when they were a hundred yards below the pass. "Buzzards flying up so quick ahead ain't good!"

Only two buzzards had soared up from the high crags above them, slowly climbing in a circle in the air. In minutes Phil Channing and the old man were pulling up, staring at a tall old white horse lying dead across the trail. Beyond the horse lay a small body stretched flat on his back, a battered old white hat gripped in the right hand.

"Damn my soul!" cried the old man, his voice a wail of anguish. "Now this, by God, I can not stand!"

Phil Channing himself could not have spoken a word if he had tried as he forced his bay on around the dead horse. Following him like a white-faced ghost in the saddle, Cobey seemed to have been stricken dumb after his first startled outburst. Silently they eased down from their saddles, their hats coming off.

A groan came from Cobey as he slipped to his knees beside the body, just a groan, a painful pause, then words, his voice sounding as if he was about to burst out sobbing.

"Little George Beaver!" He was struggling for breath, old lips trembling, eyes shiny. "Who could have shot the boy!"

"He's riddled, looks like." Channing's voice was strained, his mouth dry. "Judging from all the blood and the torn places in his shoulders and side it must have been done with a shotgun."

"A sawed-off, yeah." Cobey had come to his feet, turning his head to look at the splattered blood streaks on the white horse. "Shot from up there." He jabbed a thumb and nodded toward the ragged peak above the south side of the pass. "A gun loaded, maybe, with cut slugs of lead as well as buckshot. Damn it, Phil, surely nobody could of made a mistake! Hell fire, I never heard of no man mean enough to hurt a crippled boy twelve years old. Nobody *could* stoop low enough to kill a boy as innocent and friendly as he was!"

"Why not?" Channing's tone was flat, that cold blue-ice glint again in his eyes, his face like gray marble. "You ought to know that in this country they kill helpless and innocent women riding peacefully along a trail!"

"Yeah, your mother, I know." Cobey was getting a grip on himself, voice steadying back to its hard old grind. "A trigger-drunk fool and never no doubt of it in my mind. But" —he cleared his throat with a nervous little rasp— "at the same time I've always felt that the bullet was never aimed to harm a pinch of hide on Merry Channing. The killer wanted your granddaddy, nobody else, and them who wanted him didn't have guts enough to try him face to face. Merry being in the buckboard and it sort of gettin' dark made it look easy for a man thinking himself a cracker-jack shot. Hell, Merry was too young and purty for any man to want to kill 'er!"

They were grimly silent for a long minute, standing with hats in hand and hands gripped into fists against their hips. But being stilled by their thoughts was not enough to let them be taken off their guard. They kept watching the rocky spurs above them. The killer could still be lurking up there with his deadly shotgun.

LITTLE GEORGE BEAVER had been close to both of them. He had come to the basin a sick and undernourished two-year-old baby, half-dead with the rickets, in the arms of old Boots Beaver. Boots himself had been almost dead from a fever brought on by the loss of blood and the festering of seven bullet wounds in his body, arms and legs. Even now, after ten years, no one knew the boy's true story, because questions were rarely asked in the basin, the rule being that each man's history began the day he arrived.

Old outlaw Boots fevered eyes burning in sunken sockets, hair uncut for weeks and his beard a tangled cloud, had growled, "Little and ugly and knotty as he is, just put it down that he belongs to me, and that's enough said from now on to forever."

Indian squaws and the wives of three of the younger wanted men in the basin had started work on Little George and the old man. Old Boots who had said his right name was George had come back to life and his raw-boned self in a month. Little George had bobbed along between life and death through a long fall and an exceptionally hard winter, having to change from one wet-nurse to another, and had remained crippled in both legs. Never spoiled by the attention he had received, there had not been a man or woman in the basin who did not feel great affection for him.

Cobey frowned heavily now, looking down at the dead crippled boy. "Let me get on my horse," he muttered, "and I'll carry him in my arms. Blood's still seepin' out of him, which means he ain't been dead long. A notion sort of strikes me the boy was trying to come to town to tell us somethin'. The boys behind us will hurry on when they recognize that old white horse."

CHAPTER VI

Rattleweeder

HARD as they were, men who thought they had seen everything mean men could do to each other, old Cobey and Phil Channing were not prepared for what they were still to face. With the boy's body lifted in his arms, Cobey carried it as gently as possible, his old face screwed into an expression of pain but showing no concern because of the dripping blood.

As they rode on only the rattle of the shale underfoot broke the weird silence that now seemed to grip the pass, the

lofty spurs above them looking like grim sentinels waiting for what would happen. Once through the pass and they were on a rough slope dotted with low pines and rocks.

Ahead, across a deep-walled valley and only two miles away, was the high, rock-shouldered mouth of Devil Drum Basin. It was only a narrow gash, looking strangely still and lone in the great belt of shadows cast by the sun already gone into hiding behind towering peaks in the distance.

In the same strange quiet they entered the mouth of the basin. Except at high-noon shadows here were always deeper than on the outside. Once through the pass between the high shoulders the land dropped, appearing to tilt to the right as if the bottom had fallen out of it.

In the distance was a great drum-shaped mass of dark rock with a shining round ebony top that had given the basin its name. All in all it was a tremendous hole, forty miles long and twenty wide, gorges and canyons slashing it, tumbling little waterfalls everywhere, the rich bunch grass stirrup-high on the queer formations of flats and high mesas.

Straight ahead now on a benchlike flat was the Channing ranch house of logs and stone. The corrals, barns and sheds were behind it and beyond, under curving cliffs three hundred feet high. As they neared, keeping their horses at a fast walk, the very air seemed to be getting heavy and depressing. Not a single sign of movement showed ahead, not a dog came out to bark a welcome.

"And I smell something, Phil." Cobey was riding to Channing's left, the body of the boy resting across one arm and his lap. "I'll swear I do! And I don't like it. My keen old nose seems to be pickin' up a tinge of burned gunpowder!"

"Yes, I smell it now!" Channing's head moved in a quick nod, eyes staring at the house, especially at the long flagstone porch. "Somebody's lying on the porch!"

"And somebody else is on the ground in front of the porch like a drunk tumbled on his face!" Cobey's voice jerked with rising excitement. "That red blanket! I'd say it's Wild Horse, our Cheyenne! This might be what Tomahawk Charley was wanting to tell me and didn't know all of it!"

It looked worse when they were pulling up at the hitch-rack at the end of the porch. They could see blood pooled around the man on the porch, and recognized the still figure of old Boots Beaver! Out on the ground, pitched face-downward between two blue-gray rocks as high as a man's hips, was Wild Horse, a flat-faced old Cheyenne buck who had been making his home in the basin for more than twenty years. The darker smear of red on the blanket always wound around him told them that he was dead.

Leaping from his saddle Channing reached up to swing the lifeless figure of Little George down from Cobey's arms and place it on the end of the porch. Boots was still alive when they got to him and rolled him over on his back.

HE CRACKED dazed eyes and looked up, a smile of pain trembling his bloody lips, a gurglelike sigh sounding from his throat.

"So—so," he gasped, not seeing the small body, "he found you. My Little George—got through. They said a guard —on the pass—would stop him. I—I'm going fast, Phil. Got something you must hear—after all these years. Little George was—my son's boy. They killed Dave—in Texas. Took Little George and his mammy to Utah. She went—harlot for—the man who killed Dave. I killed him—in the honkytonk where she was—for sale. Shot my way out. Bringing the —the little feller with me."

"But what happened here, Boots!" Channing put his hand on the man's shoulder urgently when Boots's voice came to a stop, his eyes closing. "Who did this to you?"

"You—be good to—him, Phil." The bloody lips were moving again, eyes staring straight upward, a glassy sheen already filming them. As he gasped desperately for words blood streaked from the corners of his mouth. "He—won't ever be—strong. Loves you—and—Badger like—"

"All right, Boots!" Channing thrust his hand under the man's head, lifting it from the floor, hoping for a few more words. "Tell us *who shot you!*"

"Ain't no use, Phil." Cobey began straightening up stiffly, the bones in his knees making little crackling sounds. Once more his battered hat came off, the brim rolling in his gripping hand. "Old Boots is done. Glad he didn't know about Little George. May his pore old hell-battered soul rest in peace. Watch things here for a minute or two!"

He spoke excitely as if something had suddenly come to him. He surged forward, the alert fighting man, a wolf who never stepped into a trap, a six-shooter in his right hand as he hurried past the limp figure of Beaver and on inside the open front door of the house.

In only a few seconds he was returning. His six-shooter had been rammed awkwardly back in its holster, half the weapon still hanging above the top of it. With his hands pawing at the jamb of the doorway like those of a drunken blind man, he stumbled, rocked back, and leaned against the wall. His face was so bloodless he might have been about to drop in his tracks.

"*Gawd!*" he groaned as if the word were being torn from the depths of his soul. "I'm old! Damn it, I'm old!" He looked as if he were about to burst into hysterical sobbing. "I just can't stand things like I used to stand 'em, Phil!"

"What's the matter now?" Channing leaped toward him. "What in hell did you see inside?"

"Emma!" he choked. "Emma—in the kitchen, Phil. She's shot through the head—an' dead on the floor at the side of the stove! It's hell. This place ain't nothing but hell now!"

Often as tough as a crocodile's hide on the outside, Badger Cobey had always been a soft quivering old cooter once something touched the true inside of him. Phil Channing had always known that. He had seen Badger touched by pain and sudden death many times, too, but he had never been like this.

Little George's murder had stung him to the heart, for he had had a deep and fatherly interest in the boy. Badger had felt the killing of Boots Beaver deeply also, for like all the men in the basin he had considered Boots a staunch friend. But now Emma—it was all too much for Badger.

EMMA was the tall, handsome Crow squaw of forty-odd who cooked for the outfit. Between her and Cobey was an understanding which they had fatuously believed they had kept a secret for twenty years, but everybody knew it, and smiled indulgently at the arrangement. Emma had been Badger Cobey's right arm and his heart, the shining light of an old man's eye. She had washed and mended his clothing, kept his little room spick and span out in a private corner of the largest barn. Everything he had or would ever had belonged to Emma. And that might be considerable for Channing had heard whispers of an earthern crock hidden somewhere, the bank where the two deposited their money, frugal souls who spent little of their earnings.

In the kitchen there had been murder in cold blood, like the killings out front. Neither Boots Beaver nor the old Cheyenne had had a weapon, for they were not in the habit of carrying guns inside the high, protecting walls of the basin.

Beside the stove Emma lay flat on her back. As an insult added to murder, a pretty, many-colored skirt Cobey had bought for her was left whipped high above her waist, her bare, coppery legs shining. Only a small smear of blood was under her head, the rest having drained through a big crack between the

wide hand-split planks of the floor.

"Damn 'em!" raved the old man as he followed the dazed Channing back to the kitchen, still rocking and foggy-eyed as if half-drunk. "They left her like that for me!"

Channing pushed him back as he bent forward and gave the pretty skirt a downward pull to cover the long legs. "Get hold of yourself, Badger. Other things have happened here. This won't be all of it, not when a gang such as we're up against now gets to work."

They went outside, Cobey still blundering at Channing's heels. It looked quiet down at the barns, sheds and corrals, but death was there, hidden only for the moment. They found Juan Garcia, a one-eyed little Mexican, flat on his face and dead in a pool of blood in the hallway of the second barn. Under an upper shed they found the body of a young half-breed Ute named Dude Calloway with a bullet through his back that had shattered his spine to drop him in a bent heap.

"Looks like quick and unexpected work all around, Phil." Cobey again had a grip on himself, voice growing deadly quiet, a faint grind in the tone remindful of a rattlesnake's buzzing. Now he was a mean and dangerous old devil, his yearning for the blood of revenge a growing ache. "Everybody, of course, knowed that it was your day to go to town for supplies, and maybe all this has been in the making for a month."

"Phil," —he caught Channing with a lean hand on the right shoulder, a wild, half-mad smile suddenly on his face, eyes strangely like shining stars— "somethin' tells me I ain't never known what it is to relish killing men. I've heard some fellers say they got a sort of a crazy joy out of it, but I never believed 'em, thinking it only a lot of lip. I've seen that damned look that comes in the damned mean human eye when hot lead goes through their guts. I've seen 'em fetch up short, terror tearing hell out of 'em before they fell. Big and bad and runnin' all over you one second, the dirty damned cowardly jackals, its different when a son-of-a-bitch feels the hot balls setting his guts afire!"

"All right, Badger." Channing pushed the clawlike hand down and took a firm grip on his arm. "I know how you feel. Save your talk for bigger things."

CHAPTER VII

Killers on the Rim

COBEY looked as if about to burst out laughing.

"Once you let 'em start pushing," he said, "they'd stomp their own mothers' hearts out for a little piece of silver. I've seen—"

"All right, Badger." Channing's hand tightened. "I've grown up beside you. I know how you feel about a lot of things. Since the Channings got a start somebody, somewhere, has been trying to make all out war between the Rattleweed and the Devil Drum, and—"

"And, damn it, you've done what you could to keep it down, stopping it at every turn just like your granddaddy, your mammy and your daddy done before you!"

"With your help, yes!" Channing's face was still that cold gray marble. "Always with your help because I listened to you when you'd say, 'War is only a madman's dream of getting something for nothing:' You've said that all my life. And that only the lowest, the most scheming and greediest men want wars, and never fight them themselves. But"—he shrugged, casting a cold glance at the shadowy sky— "there are times when it just has to come. The Rattleweed has always forced the issue." He was suddenly smiling, a strained, odd smile. "Whether Dan Roundtree knows it and is an actual party to it or

not. You've said he's not—"

"I've said he's just a damned fool not knowing where he's being led!" rasped the old man. "Greedy damn human hog, yeah, but too big a jackass to see where he's being led! Wanted your granddaddy and your daddy to pool with him, all lands, all stock, and him to run it all as he tries to do with everything around here."

He stepped to one side, suddenly grinning that half-crazy smile again, "Well, anyhow, me and you both now maybe can see eye to eye. My wife's dead in yonder kitchen. My wife, yeah!" He slapped his bone-hard chest. "As true a wife as ever God laid beside a man in his bed, warm and beautiful to my cold eye and hardened soul. Them who—who killed her" —his voice broke — "had to insult her dead body by—by flipping up the purty skirt—I bought her one Christmas!"

"Steady, you!" Channing reached him with a half-leap, a quick, strong arm going around him as the old man suddenly buried his face in his palms. "Damn it, I've never seen you like—"

A wailing, slapping and popping sound cut him off. Had he stood in the same spot a moment longer he would have dropped dead in that spot. A rifle bullet had come from a tall mound of rocks and low pines on the other side of the abrupt slope west of the big house. The bullet had struck a post only a foot on the other side of where Phil had been standing. Behind it now came the rifle's far and long-ringing report, a crash rolling across the basin and echoing against the high walls like the noise of a falling tree.

"Duck!" Cobey was back to himself, all fight in an instant. "Seems as how there ain't to be no time wasted in hunting or waiting for 'em. They're still here!"

Three more bullets whined at them before they could reach the rear of the house. As they headed on in and across the kitchen Cobey avoided looking at the body by the stove.

They stopped in the big living room, not fools enough to go darting out on the porch to make themselves better targets than before. Rifles were here, resting on pegs and in deerhorn racks along the walls and over the huge fireplace. As they started grabbing down a pair, more shots crashed from the tall mound of rocks to westward.

"Gawd Almighty, what now!" cried Cobey as a scream like a wail of agony lifted from the north end of the porch. "Some of the boys must of come up!"

CHANNING yelled, driving cartridges as large around as his thumb into a buffalo rifle, "It's one of our horses. They're killing them off! Looks like they want to make sure to hold us right here!"

"There goes another'n!" The old man's voice was agonized as a second horse bawled and they heard it struggling and desperately pawing the rocky ground as it fell. "Unless there's more in the upper corrals we're afoot!"

It was the end of the shooting, at least for the time being. The killers on the mound were not staying long enough to face bullets that were certain to come pouring back at them. Apparently they were fleeing down a steep slope to their own waiting horses below. As Channing and old Badger tried to watch and listen from windows opened to the porch each was certain he could hear the faint but distinct clatter of racing hoofs on rocky ground.

"Some of our boys are getting here!" exclaimed Cobey as other hoofs sounds came to them, these racing in from the north mouth of the basin. "That's what stopped 'em!"

"Sounds like only one horse!"

Channing was moving toward the doorway in spite of the danger of more bullets that might come from a hidden marksman lagging behind on the rise. Cobey swore, following him.

"It is just one horse!" cried Phil. "Hell, this just can't be, Badger!"

"But it is!" Cobey was suddenly

sober-faced, eyes popping as he stared at a sweat-slinging white mare racing toward them.

In the saddle, straight in the stirrups, rode a tall girl. Her long golden hair was flying in the wind from her hatless head, fringe fluttered from her brown leather riding skirt, and a bright-green shirtwaist outlined her breasts, pressed close by the same wind.

"No, and nine times, *no*!" muttered Cobey, still staring, unwilling to believe his own eyes. "Hell, I know I ain't drunk. Damn it, it just can't be that yaller-headed Ann Roundtree from the Rattleweed! No Rattleweeder would dare show face—"

"But it's Ann!" Phil Channing was moving forward, old buffalo rifle half-forgotten in his hand. "Yes" —a strange catch had come into his voice— "it's Ann."

"Rattleweeder!" snarled Cobey, fumbling with his rifle, a killer light filling his eyes. "Damned Rattleweeder!"

Ann's voice was like a cry from a broken heart as she plunged up, the white mare rearing and snorting a few yards beyond the two dead horses at the end of the porch.

"Phil, I had to come! I've gone as far as it's possible for any human being to go!"

"Ann!"

Channing moved on, his face drawn and white. He passed the dead horses, stopping in front of her. His voice was so low and quiet he might have been a strange being from the sky stepping out of a thundering storm with everything coming to a sudden halt behind him.

It had been more than five years since he had seen Ann Roundtree except from a distance. Twice Badger Cobey had caught him watching her through a long brass telescope from a tall peak on the rim of the basin, and he had had his say about it in a grumbling voice.

"A kid sweetheart's hard to get out of your system, Phil," he'd said, "but she just ain't for you no more. She's only a dream you had, purty and sweet and all like dreams can sometimes be. You can just about bet that she never thinks of you, and you'd better shove all thoughts of her into the far."

RIGHT now Badger Cobey got the surprise of his life. Ann Roundtree had dismounted and white-faced, lips bloodless, she was standing there with her hands pressed against her well-rounded bosom, an expression half-fear, half-wild longing or hurt in her big blue eyes. Suddenly she looked as if she were losing her mind, her voice rising to a scream.

"I've known that they wanted to kill you! Dad told me he would kill me if he ever heard of my being near you again! I—I've stayed away, Phil, because I didn't want them to hurt you! I've told them I would kill myself if they did! They know I've always loved you, always will! I—"

"Ann!"

CHAPTER VIII

Bullets Hold the Fire

EVERYTHING was forgotten. Dropping the buffalo gun, Phil Channing shortened the distance between him and Ann Roundtree. She leaped the other yard. His arms lifted. She went into them, her hands around his neck, her fingers locking.

"Phil!" she sobbed. "Phil!"

"Ann!" His voice was hoarse, and a wild light shining in his eyes. "In spite of all, you're still mine and always will be!"

"Well, now, I'll be damned!" Badger Cobey sawed off his hat and vigorously started scratching his head, eyes filled with something akin to awe. "And—and I thought I'd seen everything! Guess I'm just a boy in my first

pair of long pants, after all!"

"They're going to wipe you out, Phil!" Ann was hysterical, crying, laughing, sobbing there in his arms. "Sheriff Hank Butcher and Ira Ward are backing them. They'll keep hands off and let them go the limit, calling the basin a hole filled with outlaws who should have been hanged or shot years ago! Old Bat Wingate in the Rocky Mountain Saloon has been furnishing the money for the last two years and helping to bring in extra gunmen. He has been behind most of our troubles, yours and Dad's. Dad's such a fool, and so far in debt he just won't see that Bat Wingate and a big cattle and sheep combine behind that old saloonkeeper will take over everything as soon as things are like they want them."

"Watch things now, Phil!" Cobey had to speak roughly to make them hear him. His eyes were on a tall rim to westward where the long twilight still hung its bright and golden halos in the high places. "Looks like a whole army ganging up!"

"And another, maybe, at our very door!" Phil cried, as his head jerked up.

Shots in the distance were echoing now. In the deeper shadows in the mouth of the basin the supply wagon appeared. Peg-legged Rice Jackson was slashing furiously with his whip, keeping the sweat-streaming horses at a run. Riders behind him were shooting it out with other riders attempting to charge through the mouth of the basin at their heels.

"Let 'em come!" cried Cobey. "With our boys or what's left of 'em we'll at least have some kind of a fighting crew, and a few here can do a lot of dirty work!"

"But suppose Rattleweeders are already in here!" warned Ann. "They'll only wait for darkness. All of them have been told to save as many of the buildings and corrals as possible!"

"And that means fire!" Channing looked up at the high rims behind the big ranch house, eyes narrow slits. "It has been tried before."

He turned, looking back at the oncoming wagon. Feeling safe once he was inside the basin, Rice Jackson was slowing the horses to a walk. Behind him scattered firing was still going on. Three or four men could easily hold that narrow entrance, the real reason outlaws had made the basin their hide-away.

"Jumped us on the pass!" Jackson yelled as soon as he was close enough to make his voice heard. "Boys had just enough whisky in 'em to make a clean sweep, knocking them loose from the high places but they tried for us on the slope! Our boys whipped 'em ag'in now they're licking hell out of what's left back there in the mouth!"

As if too excited to see anything here, he made his usual turn ot the left and drove on behind the house. By this time half the other riders were approaching, half-drunk in their saddles and laughing, happy-go-lucky devils not guessing what lay ahead of them to start them sobering the moment they saw it.

"And look now!" Cobey was staring at another place, the tall rim on the east side of the basin mouth. "It ain't purty up there, nary bit of it ain't, but it's like I always say. The more they come, the more we'll kill."

RIDERS were up there, no less than a dozen of them already in plain sight. A great golden halo lay in a ring around them, the barrels of long rifles shining. Every man up there was a killer, and every man carried something like an unwieldy bundle tied to the skirts and the cantle of his saddle.

If never before, Devil Drum Basin was going to see a finish fight!

Long before midnight, four of the sheds and one of the smaller barns south of the house were burning. Dropping balls of fire made by bundles of hay carried behind saddles had started them, with men on the rims pushing the bundles forward with the ends of long poles that let them remain out of sight and danger. [*Turn to page 96*]

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Flames against the cliffs were like great yellow and golden-red sails flapping in the darkness. The air was still, a little moon came and went behind the broken clouds, smiling down on the crackling and spark-showering fury for a few moments at a time, then appearing to drift away, hidden by moving black and gray blobs against the sky.

Below in the basin the stabbing gunfire came slowly, not a shot being wasted, no nervous fingers merely pulling triggers. The crash and roll was that of men grimly fighting, keeping themselves out of the light of the flames. By constantly shifting their positions, two flames from a single weapon were rarely seen as the marksmen plugged away at the high rims with bullets, their fire so slow and deliberate it could come from only battle-hardened marksmen.

"Leastwise, we're doing our part." Badger Cobey wore his mean old fighting smile as he lay on his stomach in the rocks under the trees with Rice Jackson to his left. "We're showing 'em which side we hired out on. If all the gal says is true, maybe we ain't got the chance of a snowball in hell, but I'm gambling on getting as many of them killers up there as I can take along with me."

"And maybe" —Jackson was trying to smile and making a poor job of it— "your gambling's only going to get you a tombstone, if anybody's left in our little short-tailed bunch to edge up a flat rock at the head of your grave. The others won't bother about a grave. They'll just drag you off and leave you for the buzzards."

"Damn gloomy, ain't you, pard?"

"Nope." Jackson had a real smile this time, a chuckle behind it. "Just trying to be cautious so's to come through with no great rewards or trumpets blowing, so to speak."

"And of course no holes in you!"

"Hell, I've got enough damn holes!"

The fight was a slow-holding fight, bullets steadily popping the brittle rocks of the rim for only two hundred yards to keep the mob above from firing the nearer buildings and sheds.

With no wind yet to fan the flames, the blazes already set would soon burn themselves out. The attackers were too far away to set fire to the others. But once the buildings right behind the house began burning the house soon would be going with them, and nothing would remain but charred and blackened ruins.

Ann Roundtree was with Phil Channing. They were shifting from spot to spot together in the darkness. Channing was still carrying the heavy old buffalo gun that fired a hellish bullet, with powder enough behind it to kill a man a mile away. Ann had no weapon. Her light six-shooter was on her saddle now in the rocks in front of the porch. Her mare was hidden with the rest of the horses down the slope under the heavier trees and in the taller rocks.

WHAT the two of them were doing now was of no concern to old man Cobey, but he had had words to say at the beginning, when volleys of shots had been bursting on the rim before the balls of fire began falling.

"Keep her out of the fight!" he had growled. "I ain't saying she won't fight just as hard as we will, and maybe shoot just as straight, but it ain't the thing to expect her to pump lead at her daddy, mean as he is, if he's up there with the rest."

"But he won't be there," Ann had assured Channing as soon as they were left to themselves. "Hired gunmen do the fighting and the killings in times like this."

"And who, Ann," he had asked gently, "killed Little George and the others here?"

"That, Phil, will be a question as it was with others who were killed before them. I'll never know. Rattleweeders always deny any part in killings unless it's in public. They pass the blame along to others, or throw suspicion on entirely

innocent people. Breeding hate by casting suspicion is an art with them. In the past few months alone I have learned things I would never have believed if I hadn't turned sneak and spied on my own father. My mother always felt that he was next to righteousness itself in all his dealings. Perhaps it is as well —for her—that she is dead, for now she will never know he will kill me as quickly as he would shoot a rattlesnake."

"Because you came to me?"

"Because I came to you, yes." She nodded. "And—and to tell it all, Phil, there's something inside his head. Old Doc Joe Larking told me about it six months ago in Tombstone River without Dad knowing. You must know of that fight he had in the Rocky Mountain a year after I was born. Behind his right ear is still the scar that he tells people was made by a glancing bullet. Drunken old Doc Bender treated him at the time. Now Doc Joe says that bullet is still in his head, and slowly driving him mad!"

"That may explain some things." Channing frowned. "But it must have been doing a lot of queer and mean things to him long before this, Ann."

"Without a doubt," she agreed, "but what I have told you is in confidence. I know you'll keep it."

A sudden rise in the firing put an end to talk. Being on higher ground than before, Channing saw the meaning of it. A ball of hay was beginning to blaze up above a shed nearer the house. Thrusting Ann back and into the lower rocks behind him, he slid the buffalo rifle forward, taking quick aim. As the rifle delivered its heavy report other rifles cracked to right and left.

No one could have told whose bullet reached the squatting and almost hidden figure of a man up there, but one of the bullets lifted him. It staggered him, half-turned him, made him rock forward. Before Channing could fire again three more rifles had slithered out yard-long flames, their prolonged crashes filling the basin and rocking up and down the cliffs.

Before they died away, the would-be firebug was in the air, a loose-legged and flapping scarecrow coming down, his burning ball of hay left to blaze harmlessly behind him as he crashed into the roof of an old shed and smashed right on through it to the rocky ground below.

"Cannon ball on the fly!" Old Cobey's voice lifted, and mocking laughter came braying from him. "Let another'n try that trick and watch us bring him spinning down!"

CHAPTER IX

Dawn Comes Quietly

IT WAS hell to keep the raiders at bay when midnight came. They had grown bolder up there on the rim, as they grew more desperate with continued failure. The orders to spare the larger buildings, to save them for others who would find fine use for them had succeeded only in getting two more men killed or sorely wounded for they had dropped back out of sight.

No more had fallen, but now even the leaders appeared to be giving up the thought of saving anything. Other fire balls were beginning to blaze. Men were again using long light poles to push the flaming hay forward, inching it along to a spot from which it would drop on the largest buildings.

Seeing the danger, Phil Channing had left Ann below, safe in the rocks, with her promise to stay there. Armed with a lighter rifle and a belt of cartridges swinging to his back, he had climbed up a tall old oak on the highest rise of ground on the bench above the slope.

Even old Badger Cobey cursed him in a low voice, calling it rank suicide, but he was up here now, in the highest fork he could reach. The rifle had been thrust in place. Grimly he began shooting,

tight-lipped and white-faced, knowing that he was facing death here when the most beautiful girl in the world, as far as he was concerned, was waiting breathlessly for him below.

It was all-out hell and all at once. At his first three shots he saw three men staggering and falling, shot down in the very light they were making with the balls of burning hay. Channing got his fourth quick shot at a man. He saw the fellow stagger, and at that instant the entire rim seemed to burst into gunfire and yells, the stab and crash of flames simultaneous.

Two men who had not been fired at from below were suddenly breaking cover on the rim. As if they had suddenly gone mad they raced toward the lip of the rim instead of away from it. One of them stumbled, throwing up his arms as he fell backward. The other jerked to a rocking halt right on the rim, teetering there for just a moment, both hands gripped his mid-section. Then he was coming on down, another human cannonball bound for a roof below, to splinter his way through it.

"Down, Phil, down!" That was Cobey, his high-cracked voice wailing like an old woman's beneath Phil at the bole of the tree. "Gawd Almighty, don't you know the damned Cheyenne yelling and war-crying when you hear 'em ringing in your ears! *Come down!*"

Channing went down as quickly as he could, but as he went down all the hellish sounds in the world seemed to be coming from the rim. Shots were still lashing. But men were breaking, shouting, cursing and running like stampeding horses in their terror.

"I thought they'd come sooner or later!" Cobey was dancing like an old fool when Channing's feet touched the ground, and Ann Roundtree hastily caught his arm. "Our Indians! Our own Indians! Hell alive, I knew they'd fight for us at the proper time, and there they are, happy with the blood they've spilled!"

Everything seemed to come to Channing all at once. There were somewhere close to fifty-five or sixty Indians living in the basin. Many of them were like wild or half-wild beings, shadowy in their coming or going, living in caves and in the dark, narrow gorges, keeping to themselves and having nothing to do with Channing or his men.

It had always been like that, ever since the day the first Channing had ridden into the basin. No Channing had tried to change them against their will, letting them live their lives as they wanted to live them. Many, especially the old ones, had their own good but never-uttered reasons forever to hate the sight of a pale-face.

IT WAS like the sudden let-loose of all kinds of hell and damnation up on the rim now. Many of the would-be firebugs and killers had completely forgotten that they had horses under the dark trees behind them. Others probably were gripped with instant notions that horses would not be fast enough to get them away from the massed charge of death.

At first there had been only faint shadows in the shadows, noiseless and creepy, stealing from rock to rock, from tree to tree. Timing themselves to perfection, a fierce and blood-chilling battle-cry of the old days had shot them into living and terrible shapes springing forward with guns, knives, bows and arrows.

Ten minutes later Cobey reported, "No, them lobos ain't coming back! They've seen the elephant and heard the owl!"

Men were coming out of the rocks and the inky pools of darkness. Not a sound came from the rims. Horses and men were gone as if a windstorm had swept them away, leaving only an awesome hush behind.

"But—but what brought them!" stammered peg-legged Jackson, still scared. "It was so damn quick my—my teeth still chatter!"

"Them ain't your store-boughts,

Rice!" Cobey leered a grin at him. "That's what's left of your little dried seeds of brains you've got rattling around in that empty-gourd head you've got. They brought themselves. Hell, don't you ever be fool enough to think an Indian don't know what's going on around him. . . ."

Ann Roundtree had been asleep for three hours in Phil Channing's big old-fashioned bed when dawn lifted its morning-branding gray streak along the rims. Channing and Cobey had not slept at all, prowling the darkness until now.

There had been no fear at all for the safety of the girl or anything else. It did not mean that the Indians were gone just because they could not be seen. They had come when needed by the men who had never molested them. They were all around, and were going to stay there until every hint of danger was gone, and were certain it would not return.

"You're going to tell her, of course?" Cobey spoke quietly in the gray light as they came in from the direction of the mouth of the basin. "Ain't going to put it on me?"

"I'll tell her." Channing set his jaw. "I think she'll be expecting it. Anyway —he shook back his shoulders—"from now on anything that concerns her is my job."

He found her in the kitchen. Emma's body had been taken to the living room and the kitchen floor had been scrubbed clean. Ann was standing at the stove, making coffee and looking as if she had always belonged there, and always would.

With an awkward stumbling Phil got it out.

"Your father was up there after all, Ann. Odd, but Bat Wingate and big Ira Wade were there too. Guess they couldn't resist coming along to see the last big thundering show that would spell the end of the Channings forever."

"And the Channings"—she put a steady hand on his arm, face straight—"just getting started. This pair to be, I mean."

"Hank Butcher will probably blame it all on Ira come election time in November." He was still struggling to say the rest of it, trying to make it clear to her. "I'm trying to say, Ann—"

SHE FINISHED it for him with a nod. "That Dad is dead, yes. The Indians got him, and would the first thing. Now the bank will take half of all the cattle and horses. The rest, and the land will come to me, Phil. My mother saw to that in her will because it was all her money in the first place. Dad first started hating me when I wouldn't sign over everything to him. Now the Rattleweed and the Devil Drum will be the one finest range west of the Missouri River. I—I didn't hate him, Phil. I was only sorry —for him."

"Yes, Ann!"

He swept her into his arms, holding her tightly, kissing away the tears that came flooding. Dawnlight was beginning to make silvery streaks and gay patterns on the neat curtains Emma's patient and tireless hands had placed at the kitchen windows.

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The doctor was sure Malone would try to kill him,

yet when the time came they were both surprised

THE BULLET

By ROBERT SIDNEY BOWEN

He shook his head and shifted his gaze to take in the details of the office.

"Not a thing, Doc. A social call. Surprised, ain't you?"

I admitted I was. I could have admitted I was scared blue, too, but he probably saw it in my face. "I hadn't realized how the time had passed," I added.

"Not all of it has," he said. "I was a real good boy in that prison. They gave me seven months off. What are you thinking about, Doc?"

My eyes had followed the hand he moved to the butt of his gun. I glanced up at his face.

"You're going to shoot me?" I asked.

His smile was no balm for my fears, nor the way he shook his head.

"Nope. If I was a fool I would, but I ain't. I just come from seeing Mary. You don't move very fast do you, Doc?"

"What do you mean?"

"Figured you to make your play while I was in prison," he said. "Sure you and she'd be hitched by now. Kind of surprised me."

I didn't say anything. If he'd seen his wife she'd probably said it to him.

"Yep, kind of a surprise to find I still had a wife," Malone spoke again. His lean face darkened. "Seems, though, I ain't going to have one for long. Said she didn't think it right while I was in prison. But now I'm out she figures to go to a judge about it. Why'd you two plan it that way, Doc? I don't savvy."

"You won't believe me, Malone," I said, "but we didn't. This is news to me."

"You ain't a good liar, Doc!"

"It's the truth," I told him. "I don't poach. As a matter of fact, I haven't spoken a dozen words to your wife since you went to prison, except as her doctor, or about somebody in her sister's house where she went to stay. But you probably won't believe that, either."

"Maybe I do," he said to my surprise. "But that ain't changing anything. She ain't getting rid of me to get hitched to you, Doc. You know why?"

I said I didn't, but I was able to guess close as his expression changed.

"'Cause you ain't going to live that long," he said, straightening up. He turned and took hold of the door knob. "That's all I come by to say. 'Night, Doc."

He pulled the door open, stopped, and looked at me over his shoulder.

"It ain't all on account of Mary," he said. "But I reckon you know that."

This time he went through the door, closing it softly behind him. I sat there in my chair trying to force myself not to think. I picked up the pencil and made the last entry in my book, but I did so automatically, or perhaps subconsciously. My brain was spinning backward in memory, and there was no stopping it.

SIX years ago I had come out to Devil's Falls fresh from the St. Louis Medical School with a square of paper with printing on it in Latin that gave me the right to practice as a doctor of medicine. I'd chosen Devil's Falls as the place to hang out my shingle on the advice of one of my instructors who'd lived there, and kept in touch. It was a small cattle town that was growing fast, and the only doctor there was too old to handle more than a quarter of his patients. A great opportunity for a young medic just starting out, and I'd grabbed it.

Within six months old Doctor Heany passed away, and the entire field was mine. The extra patients weren't any trouble at all. The people of Devil's Falls are grand folks, with no stuffy, old-fashioned ideas about newcomers. When they're sick or injured they only want to be made well as fast as possible. Whether by one of their own or a newcomer had no importance to it at all. Then I met Mary.

It was at a church social one Saturday evening. Somebody introduced us, and for me the world stood still. I guess it did a little for Mary, too. Two people meet and they suddenly both *know*. As simple as that. Even when it finally dawned she had been introduced as Mrs. Kirby Malone, nothing changed in me. She said something polite, and so did I. Then whoever it was took her some place else, and

I didn't see her again until two weeks later when she came to my office with a nasty cut on her thumb that had started to fester.

While she was there I don't think we spoke five words. There didn't seem to be any need for words. I guess, too, we were both a little afraid of what had hit us. Anyway, the following day I stopped by the Malone place while making my rounds and put a fresh bandage on her thumb. I met Kirby Malone that day, and I disliked him on sight, but that was only natural.

I stopped by again two days later, and I'll admit it wasn't entirely for reasons of medical routine. Malone walked out to my horse with me when I was through, and I could almost smell the suspicion growing in him. When he told me bluntly that if a new bandage was needed he'd bring Mary into town, I knew. That ended that. Or so it seemed at the time. He didn't bring Mary in, and I didn't stop by their place again.

About six weeks after Malone's thinly-veiled warning I was riding back to town from a visit to a patient living at one of the outlying ranches. I'd taken a short cut and was about to ride out of some scrub onto the main trail when two men rode by on the trail at a furious clip. Both wore kerchiefs over their faces, and the one nearest me clutched his left shoulder with his right hand. Just before they passed from my sight the man on the far side jerked his kerchief down from his face. Though it was almost dusk and the light was poor I got a good look at Kirby Malone.

When I did break out onto the main trail they were out of sight. Not even the sound of their horses' hoofs could be heard. I turned the other way and rode the four miles back to town, but just as I got there the sheriff and his posse stopped me. Had I met anybody on the trail? I told them about seeing the two horsemen, and recognizing Kirby Malone. They thundered off leaving my questions floating in the cloud of dust.

My questions were answered a little later. The express office had been robbed of a small gold shipment by two men wearing kerchiefs over their faces. The agent who had been knocked cold from behind had regained consciousness just in time to take a pot shot through the window at one of the robbers as they bolted away on their horses. The agent had not been able to recognize either of the men. I had through pure accident.

The sheriff arrested Malone at his ranch. The posse found the wounded man hiding with the loot in Malone's barn. A local no-good by the name of Rip Stebbins. He tried to put up a fight and they shot him dead. I gave my testimony at the trial and Kirby Malone was sent to the Territorial Prison for five years. Mary went to live with her sister, and just now I had told Malone the truth. The only times I'd spoken to her had been as an attending physician.

Not that I hadn't the desire to press my case, you understand. I had, because I loved her dearly, and I'm only human, too. It was Mary. Not once by so much as a look, or a word, did she give the slightest indication that considering the circumstances she was fair game. So we went on living our separate lives, just as we had five seconds after our first meeting. But now Malone was back, and Mary had told him she was going to be rid of him. And Malone had told me I would not live long enough to marry her.

AFTER a long while I stopped chasing my thoughts around in circles and blew out the office lamp. I went into the back room I used for sleeping and got undressed in the dark. I suppose that was silly because Malone could have dry-gulched me through the office window shortly after he left, but that bit of wisdom didn't occur to me then. I got into bed and tried to sleep, but it was impossible. My life had been threatened and there wasn't a single thing I could do about it except try to prevent it when the time came.

Go to the sheriff? What could he do about it, other than drop a word of warn-

ing in Malone's ear? The man was free. His debt to society was paid in full. His was the right now to come and go as he pleased. Neither the sheriff, nor anybody else, had the authority to make him pack up and go elsewhere. Besides, Malone had said he was no fool, and I believed him. If anything happened to me the finger of guilt would instantly point unwaveringly at him.

Yet he was going to take my life. When, I did not know. How, I could only guess at random. By some means or in some manner, that would not permit any part of the spotlight of suspicion, not even to mention proof of guilt, to come to rest upon him. It was long after midnight, and I was still random guessing, when sleep finally reached up and pulled me down in deep.

I awoke the next morning with an emotional hangover that lasted until I unlocked the street door of my office and the first of my morning patients came in. For two hours I thought about nothing but treating cuts and burns, putting a broken finger or two in splints, and doling out cough syrup and pills. My last visitor was young Fred Ames. He needed no medical attention. His mother was feeling sick, and would I come out to the ranch as soon as I could? His mother, by the way, was Mary's sister!

Sarah Ames was in bed and there wasn't anything wrong with her that a solid twenty-four-hours rest wouldn't take care of nicely. Ordinarily, I would have been a little annoyed at being called way out there for something so trivial, but I had the feeling I had been summoned for reasons other than Sarah. When I finished with her and went out into the livingroom I found out my feeling was correct. Mary, small and sweet and beautiful, save for the open fear in her eyes, was waiting for me at the front door.

"Please don't blame Sarah, Doctor," she said quickly. "I couldn't get to town, and I had to speak to you. My husband has been released from prison."

"I know," I told her. "He stopped by my office last night."

She looked at me as though I shouldn't be alive and put a slender hand to her throat.

"He *did*? And he didn't kill you? He plans to, you know."

I nodded. "Yes, he mentioned as much, He also spoke of what you plan. Is it true?"

A growing red spot was in each cheek as she nodded and lowered her eyes. "Yes. But—but I don't think I will now. I'm going back to the ranch to live with him. That's what I wanted to tell you. It's the only thing I can do."

I couldn't stop myself from taking her by the shoulders and shaking her gently. "That's insane!" I cried harshly. "That wouldn't stop him."

"It might."

"No!" I let go her shoulders and shook my head. "No, it wouldn't," I repeated. "It's not only that but also that I sent him to prison. He told me. Listen to me! It would only be a wasted sacrifice. I won't let you!"

"But he's going to kill you! He said so. Not in words, but I know!"

My voice sounded a whole lot more assured than I felt inside.

"He's not a fool," I said. "He wouldn't dare do it openly. I think he only hopes to scare me. Possibly make me pack up and leave town. It's only a matter of time, and then he'll forget his crazy idea. Don't you see? He knows he'd be arrested on sight if anything happened to me. Right now he may be mad clean through, but he is not a fool. If he was, he would have shot me last night. He had ample opportunity."

"You really believe that?" Mary asked.

"I believe it," I lied to her. I picked up the bag I'd dropped on a chair when I took her by the shoulders, and nodded as an added confirmation. "Don't go back to him. That would solve nothing. I'll be all right, I assure you. Now see that your sister stays in bed for the day and night. It won't hurt her any. Good day."

I went quickly out the door and mounted my horse. A man can walk just so far on dangerous ground before it

drops out from under him. I hoped she had come out the door and was watching me ride away, but I didn't look back to see. If I had, and had seen her there, the walls of Jericho would certainly have come crashing down!

THEN began the period of waiting, and watching, and waiting. I went on performing my job as the Devil's Falls' doctor in the best way I knew how, but every minute the great dark cloud hung ominously over my head. Tomorrow came, and the next day after, and the next. A week passed and I was still alive. I was carrying a small gun in a shoulder holster, but it was only excess weight. At the end of the week I heard in a roundabout way that Mary had gone to see the judge at the county seat.

As a matter of fact, on that same day I met Malone face to face in the street. I nodded and he nodded back with a little smile. He didn't act a bit like a man with murder in his heart. No snarling twist of the lips, or glare of raw hate in his eyes, or anything like that. A casual acquaintance nodding to another casual acquaintance. Nothing more. That night I began to wonder a little if what I had said to Mary might not be true after all. But I continued to carry a gun in my shoulder holster.

Two weeks passed, then three, and then a whole month. The tight, knotty fear in me began to lessen, and my sleep at night was more restful. About then, too, a mild epidemic of measles showed up in the outlying districts and I was a man needing four hands from sunup until long after sundown. One case was really serious. The little Carley boy. They lived a good 15 miles from town, but I arranged my tour of daily visits so that I could make the Carley ranch every day in the late afternoon. For three or four days it was touch and go with that little fellow, but he weathered the crisis and started on the mend.

I skipped two days to catch up on some of my other visits, and when I next saw the little fellow, it was hard to believe he'd been sick at all, let alone so close to Death's door. I got there close to supper and the Carleys wouldn't hear of me leaving without a bite and a bit of relaxation. Since it was my last call I accepted, and the sun was well behind the mountain range when I left the Carley ranch and started back toward Devil's Falls.

By then I'd found and was using a short cut which, though not too pleasant for rider and horse, lopped off close to three of the 15 miles. At one point it passed close to an aspen-studded lip of a hundred-feet-deep, boulder-choked gully. You had to be careful passing that spot since the lip was none too firm and might break away. It had already broken in several places under the fury of some storm.

I WAS half past the treacherous spot when there was movement to my right, the gully side. It was a big bay horse and sitting the saddle was Kirby Malone. His hand rested on his gun and he was smiling.

"Evening, Doc."

My first instinct was to dig my horse's ribs and bolt, but common sense told me a bullet was faster. My next impulse was to slump a little in startled surprise, which was certainly the case, and try to get my gun out and fire before Malone did. But I realized just as quickly that would be as fatal as bolting on my horse. Instead, I swallowed a dry lump in my throat and sat looking at him.

"I thought you said you weren't a fool, Malone," I said.

"I still ain't, or you'd be long dead, Doc," he told me. "You hear Mary went to the judge?"

I nodded and said nothing. If he wanted to prolong it with talk so much the better for my slim chances.

"Guess I've ridden a couple of hundred miles trailing you around," he suddenly spoke again. "Almost decided to stay at the ranch today, but I got the feeling you might not be coming by here again. Carley kid's all cured, ain't he?"

"He's well," I said. "Look, Malone, don't be crazy! You can't get away with

it. Everybody will know it was you. They'll hang you, Malone! Stretch your neck until it snaps just as sure as there's a God in the sky!"

"What are you talking about, Doc?" he asked. He wagged his head and chuckled at me. "Nobody's going to stretch my neck 'cause nobody's going to think I killed you." He stopped and quieted his restless horse. He grinned at me again and gave a little backward jerk of his head. "This gully, Doc," he said. "You were riding by and your horse stumbled. You'll be all smashed up on them rocks down there. Don't reckon anybody's going to think of looking for the bullet I'll put in you first!"

My voice sounded cracked and high. "They will! You'll never get away with it. You'll *hang*, Malone!"

He laughed and started to wag his head when it happened. Perhaps he gave an unconscious tug to the reins, I don't know. The skittish bay suddenly reared up a little on its hind legs. The sudden shifting of weight was enough. A section of the lip gave way. Kirby Malone threw himself forward in the saddle, dragging the bay's belly with his spurs. The animal made a shrill sound and tried to plunge forward but its hind legs were on crumbling dirt and stone. A full second, maybe two, and then rider and horse went toppling over backwards and out of sight.

NOT until they disappeared was I able to move a muscle. I slid off my horse and crawled on hands and knees to the edge. When I looked down I saw the bay jammed between two big boulders on the floor of the gully kicking its legs feebly. A dozen feet from the horse was Malone. He did not move.

A crazy sense of relief and one of horror kicked me in the stomach like a mule's hoof. I pushed back from the lip of the gully and looked in both directions. Some 20 yards to my left was a place where a big piece of the lip had broken away at some time. The big fall of rock and dirt had made the wall at that point far less steep than elsewhere. If a man was careful, he could get down that way.

It took me ten minutes. My lungs were bursting, and my body was drenched with sweat, when I got to the bottom. I reached the bay first and he was a pitiful thing to see. I shot him through the head and went over to Kirby Malone. He was still alive. He was even still conscious. From the way he lay twisted on the ground I knew his back was broken. What other internal injuries, I didn't know, but he was alive and breathing. Shock glazed his open eyes, but he recognized me. His lips twitched and the words came through.

"Your turn, Doc. Shoot! Said—nobody was stretching my neck."

Only then I realize my gun was still in my hand. I dropped it in my pocket and knelt down beside him. It would be fatal to try and move him alone. The only thing I could do before I went for help was to give him something that might put him to sleep, or at least ease the pain that would hit him when shock passed. I took a tablet from a bottle in my pocket and forced it between his lips.

"Chew it and swallow," I told him. "It'll help the pain. The Payson place isn't far. Just hang on hard. I won't be long."

He looked at me, his eyes stunned.

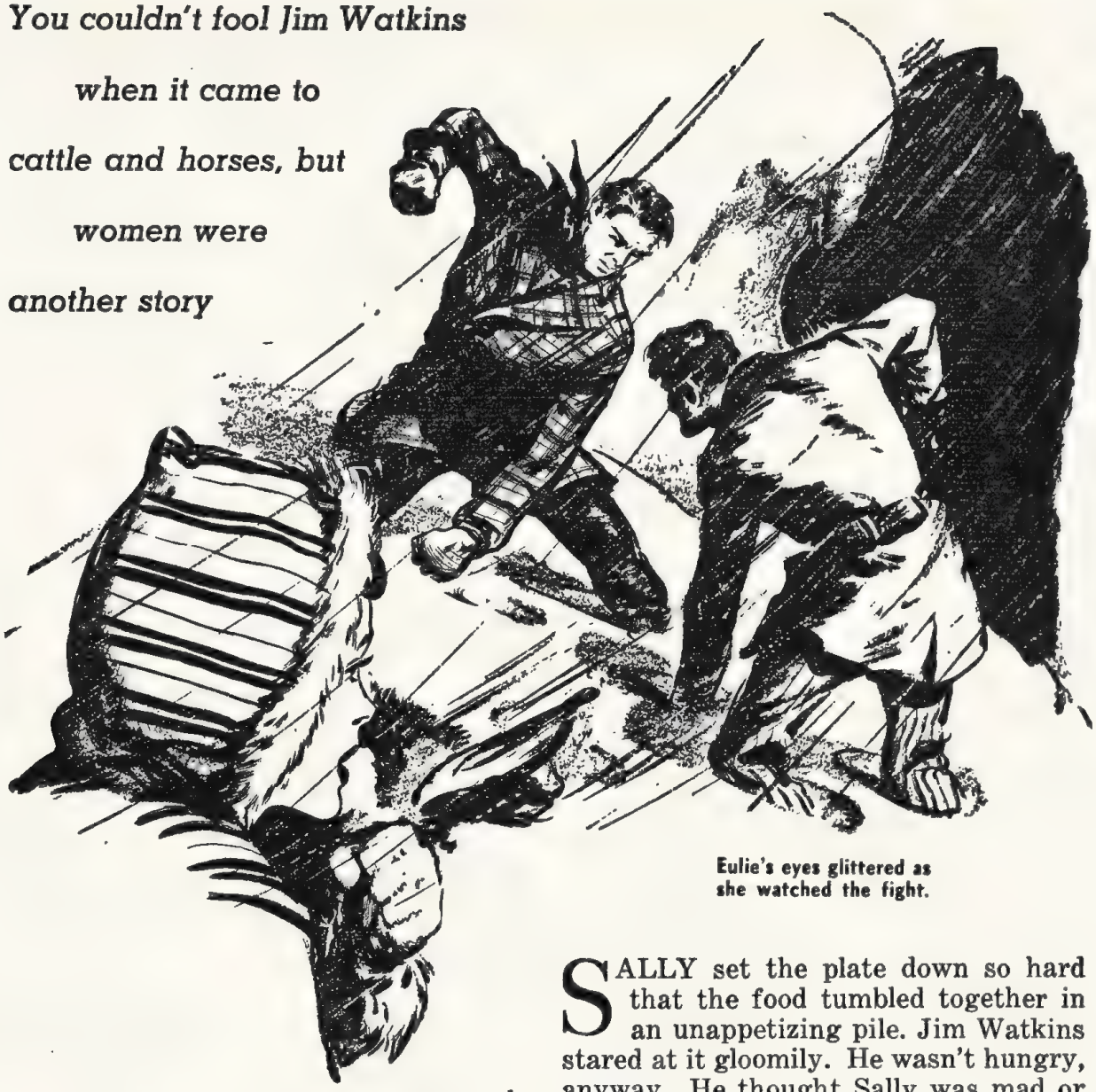
"You ain't—? I don't savvy, Doc!"

"I'm a doctor," I said and got to my feet. "You're a human being. Hang on. It's going to be all right."

I left him and ran to the spot in the wall where I'd come down. It was four times the agony going up, but I made it. A little under an hour later I was back with the Paysons in their wagon. The trip was in vain. Kirby Malone was dead. By his own hand. Whether the pain had become too great, or whether he knew he'd never walk or ride again, or for some other reason, I'll never know for sure. But he had worked his gun from its holster and had fired a bullet into his brain.

That happened a long time ago, and though Mary and I have never spoken of it, I think we both believe that Kirby Malone fired that bullet as a farewell—which was possibly his only decent act in this world. ● ● ●

You couldn't fool Jim Watkins when it came to cattle and horses, but women were another story



Eulie's eyes glittered as she watched the fight.

Traces Cut

By GILES A. LUTZ

SALLY set the plate down so hard that the food tumbled together in an unappetizing pile. Jim Watkins stared at it gloomily. He wasn't hungry, anyway. He thought Sally was mad or upset about something. She usually was particuar how she served her food.

She said, "So you've quit your job and are running away." She stood with hands on hips, head cocked a little to one side. Her hair was black, and she had snapping dark eyes and a pert little nose.

Jim flushed at the scorn in her voice. He said defensively, "What's the use of hanging around any longer? She told me a week ago it was all set. She's going to marry Gary Wendall."

Sally ran the restaurant in Black Rock town, and it was a good one. She was

alone in the world and fiercely independent. Before, she had always been easy for Jim to talk to. With a plate of her hot food inside him and the sympathy in her eyes urging him on, a man could discuss his problems.

He stirred angrily. He had not expected her to jump him this way. He had thought she would understand the lone, lost feeling a man has when the earth has been cut from beneath his feet.

He said hotly, "A tophand can get a job anyplace! It doesn't have to be around here."

"Can you get the kind of set-up you have at the Anchor? Will someone else let you build up your own herd on their grass and let you spend the necessary time looking after it?"

When he did not answer she added scornfully, "And you'd throw all that away."

Moodily he dragged the fork tines across the counter. It *was* a good set-up, but he just wasn't interested any more. He would have to write Ty Robbins after he got settled some place and tell him to sell the little herd. Right now, he didn't much care what happened to it.

He was tall and rangy with a good bone structure under a thin layer of flesh. He had flashing white teeth and laughing blue eyes, but they weren't laughing now. They were sick.

SALLY'S face softened as she saw his misery. She said earnestly, "Jim, you're grown up. Eulie Gibson was engaged when you first saw her. How could you have expected anything else?" His expression didn't change, and she said furiously, "Why don't you just shoot Gary Wendall? That would get him out of the way!"

He said with a wry attempt at humor, "I've thought of that." His eyes were pleading as he tried to make her understand. "You don't realize how a man feels, Sally. You don't—"

He stopped hastily. He thought she was going to throw the sugar-bowl at him. Now, why was she getting so mad?

Her voice came out high and shrill. "Get out of here, Jim Watkins! The sooner you're gone the better I'll like it."

He slid off the stool and picked up his warbag. He said curtly, "I'm gone. Just as soon as the mail stage leaves."

He walked to the door and opened it, his flesh bunching as a blast of cold air hit him. He looked back uncertainly. It was warm in the restaurant. He remembered all the laughter and friendly talk he had had here, and nostalgia rose within him.

Her eyes still blazed. "Shut the door behind you," she snapped.

He sighed and started to step outside. A large black cat ran between his legs and into the room. Sally came around the counter and picked it up, and he heard its contented purring. Every animal in town knew Sally Blaine. He suspected a considerable part of her profits went into feeding them.

Her fingers caressed the fur on the animal's head, but her eyes hadn't wavered from Jim's face. They hadn't changed, either. They were as hard as gun-metal.

He said forlornly, "Luck, Sally."

For an instant, he thought panic touched her face. She said, "Jim, it's so cold. If you would wait for tomorrow's stage—"

He shook his head stubbornly.

She snapped, "All right. Go ahead. Remember I tried to save you."

He shut the door, wondering what she was talking about. It was cold outside, cold as only the Jackson Hole country could get in the wintertime. The frozen snow crunched underfoot, and an icy wind howled down the Black Rock street.

He hunched up inside his mackinaw, pulling his head down into his shoulders. He had meant to look at the thermometer outside the restaurant. If it wasn't at least thirty below, he would miss his guess. The weather fitted in with the cold, frozen feeling inside him.

He stepped inside the drafty little stage depot and walked toward the glow-

ing, pot-bellied stove. Drawing off his gloves, he stretched out his hands to the welcome heat, for the moment not seeing the other people in the waiting room.

He dropped his warbag beside the stove and slowly turned, trying to warm all parts of him. He heard a girl's laugh, and the musical note in it was like a harsh hand squeezing his heart.

He did not want to look at her, but he couldn't help himself. Eulie Gibson sat on a bench beside Gary Wendall, looking up into his face. She wore a fur parka, and the fur outlined the sweetness of her face. A tendril of golden hair lay on one cheek. The color of her hair, her cheeks and lips, the blue of her eyes made a picture a man couldn't forget. Jim had been hit hard the first time he had seen her. It was still with him.

Wendall, a prosperous merchant in town, was a big, blocky man with a chin almost cruel in its harsh-cut squareness. His nose was big, his mouth a little tight, his eyes deep-set. He was grinning at Eulie. Jim thought mournfully that no tophand's wages could compete against Wendall's money.

Jim understood Sally Blaine's parting remark now. She must have known Eulie and Gary were going out on today's stage, and she had tried to save him this meeting. He thought angrily that she could have made it plainer.

HE STILL might be able to leave before they saw him. He had taken a couple of steps, when Eulie turned her head.

"Jim!" she cried.

He sighed deep within him and turned. She saw the warbag, he was carrying, and said, "You're going out, too? It'll make a nice trip for all of us." Her eyes had a bright shine, and she watched his face intently.

The disloyal thought touched him that she looked almost as though she wanted to see him squirm, but he pushed the thought away.

Wendall had one arm possessively around her. His eyes were hard, but he said matter-of-factly, "No wedding for us in this dinky town. I'm taking her to the city."

Jim could back out now, he could give some lame excuse for not taking today's stage, but with both of them watching him, his pride was roused, and he said stubbornly, "Me, I just got tired of the snow and cold."

A little laugh bubbled up in Eulie's throat, and he stared at her bitterly. She acted as though nothing had happened to him at all. He was glad when he heard the stage outside, glad for its arrival that had broken the awkward silence.

The stage was a large wagon-box set on an ordinary set of bobs. Jim noticed there were only four horses in the traces, and threw an inquiring glance at Breck Morgan, the driver. Going over Cougar Pass in the wintertime, Morgan usually drove six horses.

Morgan spat an amber stream into the snow and shifted his cud. "Got some horses sick," he said laconically. "We'll make it." He was a good teamster, and Jim nodded.

There were only the three of them going out. Jim watched Wendall help Eulie into the wagon-box. She sat on one of the mail sacks, and Wendall tucked a couple of blankets around her.

As she saw Jim preparing to swing up onto the seat beside Morgan she called in a disappointed voice, "Aren't you going to sit with us, Jim?"

He shook his head. It would be bad enough knowing she was right behind him. The canvas cover had been stripped off of the rig, and the usual stove with its stove-pipe that extended through the canvas was missing. The stove and canvas cover were fine for the flat ground, but were too dangerous on trips over the Pass. A stage could be hit by a snowslide or simply slip off the road. With that canvas cover over them, no one could jump. At best, they would be trapped inside. At worst, the fire from the stove could cook them.

Jim kept his chin buried in his collar

as they climbed through the Pass, up over steep, sharp switchbacks, and skirting the canyon dangerously. They were exposed to the full wrath of the wind, and it howled in their ears.

Morgan put his mouth close to Jim's ear and yelled, "It's going to get worse!"

Jim cursed in low, worried tones. That fool Wendall shouldn't be taking Eulie out on a day like this.

He felt the first of the fresh snow in his face and, driven before the wind, it stung like icy pellets. Breck Morgan had no time for further speech. His hands were full, trying to keep the teams on the road.

Jim knew what was running through the driver's mind. A ledge or notch road cut into the side of a hill let the snow have a tendency to pack up against the cut-bank, then edge out over the downhill side with no ground under it. If one of the horses stepped on that unsupported snow, it would drop into the canyon below. With the snow smoothly slanted across the road, it was hard to tell where the bank began and the edge of the road ended.

Jim turned his head and said sharply to Wendall, "Get those blankets off Eulie and be ready to jump!"

He heard Wendall's growl and didn't know whether it was in assent or belligerence.

THEY were a hundred yards from the top of Cougar Pass, in the steepest part of the pull, when the lead team went off. The outer horse stepped onto unsupported snow and pulled his teammate after him.

Jim felt the sickening lurch of the sled, and thought the entire rig was going. On his feet, he caught a blurred impression of Eulie leaping toward the bank side of the road, with Wendall closely behind her. He thought grudgingly, as he jumped, that Wendall had been quick enough.

Jim leaped as far as he could, for Morgan would have to have space in

[*Turn page*]

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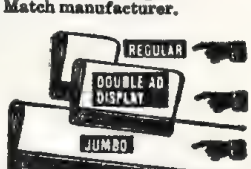

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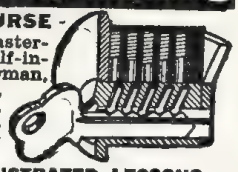

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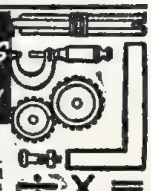

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which to land. He sank deep before he threw himself forward and sprawled out. He heard the thump of Morgan's landing near him.

As he wiped the snow from his face, his first impulse was to see if Eulie was safe. She was standing near, shaking the snow from her, and laughing. The laughter brought no answering response in Jim. It had been a near and serious thing, and laughter seemed out of place.

The lead team was almost out of sight in the snow, the sled canted precariously toward the yawning hole beneath it. The leaders had not dropped out of sight, partly because the deep snow gave them some support and partly because the weight of the other team and sled held them back.

The traces were stretched taut. The least little shifting of the lead team could drag the entire outfit over the bank.

Morgan said through pain-tight lips, "Cut 'em, Jim!" His grin was a parody of mirth. "Came down wrong. I think I busted my ankle."

Jim saw the queer angle of the man's foot from his leg. It looked to be broken, all right. He fumbled in his pocket for his clasp knife, opened it, and crept cautiously toward the lead team. He kept up a soothing monotone, not wanting the horses to move until the traces had been cut.

With quick strokes he severed the lines. One of the lead horses pawed at the snow, then both of them broke through and rolled down the side of the canyon out of sight. He looked over the edge, his stomach lurching. The team hadn't gone all the way down. He could see their heads and part of their backs a hundred yards below. The deep snow had saved them from sliding all the way to the bottom.

He pulled back, feeling the dampness of sweat on his forehead. He moved to Morgan, and Morgan soberly shook his head. The gesture said he recognized the tight fix they were in.

Jim said worriedly, "We've got to get you back to town."

"Not with a single team," Morgan grunted. "They'll never be able to pull through these drifts."

"The leaders are down there about a hundred yards, Breck. If we can dig them out, we might manage to bring them slantwise back to the top."

Morgan said, "It's worth trying."

Wendall had moved over to them. He said impatiently, "That will take time. I'll cut the other team free, and Eulie and I will ride them back to town. We'll send out help."

Jim's face was a tight, wooden mask. What Wendall suggested would take much more time than trying to free the team, and all that time an injured man would be exposed to the cold. If it came to that, Breck Morgan and Eulie could ride the remaining team, and Jim and Wendall would wait. But Jim was trying to get them all out of this cold as quickly as possible. He said shortly, "We'll try to dig them out."

He caught Wendall's black look as he plowed to the sled. He took shovels and blankets out of the stage and wrapped the blankets about Morgan.

Morgan said softly, "Couldn't be better, Jim. Don't you be fretting."

Jim nodded. "We'll hurry it up."

He thrust one of the shovels at Wendall and thought the man was going to refuse it. Jim's hands bunched. He almost hoped Wendall would refuse.

Eulie said, "I'm going down with you."

It was no place for a girl, and Jim looked questioningly at Wendall. He saw no refusal in the man's face, and shrugged. It was Wendall's affair.

Cautiously they worked their way down to the trapped horses, and Jim chose the lower horse to free first. He shoveled furiously, and in a short while had snow cleared away to the animal's belly. His eyes smoldered as he shoveled around the second animal. Wendall had been little help. He would take a few strokes with his shovel, then stop, telling Jim what to do.

Jim glanced at Eulie. If she was dis-

[*Turn page*]

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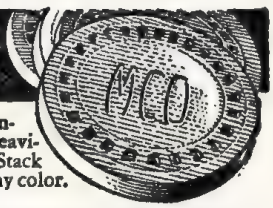

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satisfied with Wendall's work, it did not show in her face.

If the horses cooperated, they could struggle out now. But Jim knew horses. Cooperation in a predicament like this wasn't natural to them. The will for survival wasn't too strong in a horse. It would take coaxing to instill it into this pair.

He seized the bridle and, talking softly, threw his weight into the pull, urging the horse to make an effort. It heaved feebly, then quit, its eyes rolling wildly, its breathing coming in snorts.

Wendall yelled, "'I'll get them out."

He strode forward, and for the first time, Jim saw he carried Morgan's whip. Before Jim could stop him, Wendall snapped the whip across the horse's back. The report sounded sharp even above the wind. Jim yelled furiously, "You damned fool!"

The horse would cower under punishment and never make an effort. He plowed toward Wendall, but before he could reach him, Wendall had lashed the horse again.

Jim was eight feet away when Wendall turned a snarling face toward him.

"Stay back!" Wendall shouted.

His arm went back, then forward, and this time the lash was directed at Jim. The tip of it popped against his cheek, bringing a stinging pain. He pulled off a mitten and touched his fingers to his cheek. When he took the hand away, the fingers were stained red.

He looked at Eulie, seeing a strange glitter in her eyes. It came to him with a little shock that she was enjoying this. He had thought her soft and gentle, he had thought violence of any sort would frighten her.

"Stay where you are," Wendall shouted, "or you'll get more!"

"All right," Jim mumbled.

He half turned, and his shoulders sagged. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Wendall's whip arm dropping. He bounded forward, then leaped through the air. Wendall yelled as his arm went up. It came down in a savage stroke, but

Jim was out from under the lash.

His shoulder caught Wendall in the stomach, and he felt the rap of the whip-stock on his back. The force of his dive knocked Wendall backwards and down, and Jim lit on top of him. He slugged a fist into Wendall's mouth, and the spurt of blood from the mashed lips wasn't nearly enough satisfaction.

With the snow hampering movement, there would be no fancy fighting here. The sting in Jim's face was more than enough to fire his determination. He hit Wendall again, rocking his head back, and saw rage twist Wendall's face.

Behind him, he heard Eulie's cry. That was no cry of distress. It held excitement!

Wendall clubbed Jim between the eyes, and Jim's head rang. He saw a half-dozen Wendalls before him and took another punch that rattled his teeth.

Jim dropped his head behind his shoulder, blocked the next punch, and stabbed his left hand into Wendall's throat. Wendall's hoarse, heavy breathing changed to a gagging grunt. His eyes rolled in his head as he fought for breath, and his guard loosened.

Jim hit at the jaw-hinge and was high, landing on the cheek-bone. Glass appeared in Wendall's eyes. He weaved in little circles, his hands a weak defense against the punches Jim threw.

Jim battered away at that face, murderous fury still driving him. Wendall's nose was a wreck, and he slobbered through broken lips. But he was big and strong, and it took a lot of blows to put him down.

"Hit him again Jim!" Eulie cried.

The shock of her words arrested his blow, and he held the fist drawn back. Wendall could have recovered in that tiny second of respite. But the slobbering in his throat changed to a whimpering. He covered his head with his arms and moaned, "Don't hit me again! Don't hit me." Slowly, he sank into the snow.

Jim looked at him, his face twisted with disgust. He said wonderingly, "He quit. He quit cold."

[*Turn page*]

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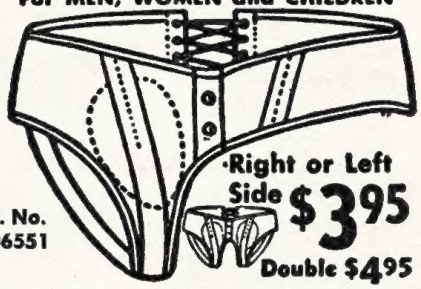

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Eulie was struggling toward him, her face radiant. "That was wonderful!" she cried. "Wonderful, Jim!"

He threw a quick look at Wendall's battered face, then looked back at her. She had seen that ruined and bloody face, and it had not appalled her.

He said soberly, "You picked him, Eulie. He's your man."

He shivered a little, and cold wasn't the cause of it. A picture of Sally, as she had stood holding the cat, flashed into his mind. Sally would have been horrified at the brutality of the fight. If that had been her man, she would have been on her knees beside him.

Eulie's face became sharper and less attractive. Her eyes glittered.

"Help him up," she said coldly and walked to the horses.

He felt a sobering freedom, a lifting of a heavy burden. His traces had been cut, too, but unlike the team, he had soared instead of falling.

He grasped the bridle again and, in a coaxing voice, urged a will into the horse to struggle a little more. He had always had a way with horses, and his voice was warm and soothing. The horse tried timidly at first, then as the snow lessened its grip, floundered more vigorously. Its front legs broke clear and threshed at the snow. It came out in a heaving lunge and stood on the security of a packed spot. The second horse would come out of it easier after seeing that successful struggle.

Jim grasped both bridles and started a slanting course up the hill. Behind him, he heard Wendall and Eulie quarreling in bitter voices. He shrugged.

He thought Ty Robbins would give him his job back at the Anchor. And there was a girl with snapping dark eyes waiting in a restaurant. She had to care a little, or she would not have been so angry at him.

He lifted his voice in a loud hallo to let Morgan know he was coming. He wished his voice could reach clear back to town. He would have liked to let someone else know the same thing. • • •

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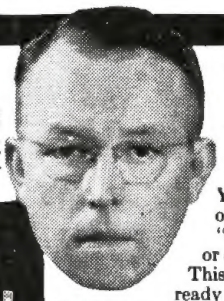

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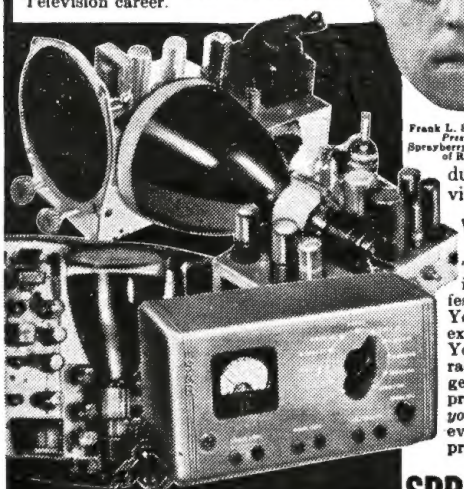

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